



LYDIA OBUKHOVA

A TALE OF POLESIE

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A TALE OF POLESIE



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CHAPTER ONE
THE DISTRICT HORIZON

1

Like ancient Rome, the little town of Glubin stands where five roads converge. Along these roads, raising clouds of dust when the weather is dry, or heaving them-

selves, engines racing heart-rendingly, out of the deep miry puddles if it has rained recently, lorries from the collective farms head for the town. On entering it they sound their horns, each raising its own distinctive voice in greeting to Glubin, the little "capital" of their district.

Shreds of cool mist cling to the sides of the lorries, torn from that clammy white blanket which the land throws off so reluctantly as night turns to day and which every roadside shrub clutches at and wraps around itself. Every other minute the heavy-ribbed tyres fling up a spatter of mud from the swampy hollows, streams and fords which from a distance lie hidden under thick, dark-green grass. "From Dvortsy Hill to Grabun Moss, forty are the fords to cross," the people of these parts say, though no one has counted the fords or given them names.

Byelorussian Polesie is the lowest-lying part of the European continent, or nearly so. Long ago the sea stretched over that land, and the land has not forgotten it to this day: it is saturated with moisture. During the spring floods the villages look like floating islands.

At that time the only vehicle that can pick its way through the roads around Glubin is a renowned khaki-painted jeep that belongs to the district executive committee. Snorting boldly it takes the fords of nameless streams at a rush while Pinchuk, the chairman of the committee, casts an experienced eye over the floods and by their width estimates the hay crop to be expected that year.

Glubin itself has been here from times immemorial. It is believed that one of the princes of Pinsk and Turov, the dynasty which at various times ruled over Pinsk, Turov and Berest—the Brest of our days—planted his younger son on the River Glubin to protect the approaches to Polesie. The princeling had a fortress built in the deep forest and surrounded it with a wall of enor-

mous logs. The march-dwellers' cottages sprang up around the fortress like mushrooms in rainy weather. The fields grew dark under the plough. People gathered honey, hunted and made pitch.

This place saw Tatars too; it was almost the farthest west they came. And they too settled in the deep forests along the banks of the good river of Glubin. To this day you may find people in the town with names like Gireyev and Shakhnazar.

In snowy winters the little town stands snugly wrapped in squirrel fur, so that sometimes a bird will fly over it without distinguishing it from the surrounding forest.

Even in summertime, at night, when the electric current has been switched off at the main, Glubin is swallowed up in the primeval darkness and silence.

But with the dawn Glubin awakes to bustling human activity. The dairy and the brick works exchange blasts on their hooters, the mail plane lands, the postmen mount the creaking steps of the porches, delivering letters and newspapers. And from early spring to late autumn a perky, noisy little steamer carries holiday-makers and folk on various errands along the Glubin, whose cool fresh waters are infused with forest herbs. After their long journey those travellers see in the little town of Glubin that desirable "point of final destination" for which they have been straining their eyes since the first streak of dawn appeared in the sky.

Very early one summer morning, when every blade of grass bent under the weight of its spangle of dew and lorries were racing towards Glubin along all five roads, the district executive committee's jeep was speeding back from the regional town, gallantly topping one sandy ridge after another.

It was four in the morning, no later. A pinkish light was breaking through the night mist. In the undergrowth beside the road the birds were trying out their voices. But because Glubin was still a good way off Chairman Pinchuk kept looking impatiently at his watch.

"Let it rip, Timofei," he pleaded with the driver. "I've called people in from the whole district."

In the back of the car sat a girl. She was wearing a check-patterned frock and had a red leather handbag slung over her shoulder. Her eyes, dark under straight, full brows, looked as if they were always on the point of registering surprise, delight, shock—in short, some active attitude to life. Now she was listening with curiosity to the conversation and with no less curiosity looking out of the car at the scenes that opened to her view.

Every time the car jolted on a specially big bump her suitcase bounced and she would grasp it in her arms; and these thin arms, bare almost to the shoulders, with bones sticking out at the elbows and wrists, were somehow particularly eloquent and completed her whole appearance of callow youth, of a time when looking at a person one does not know whether life is being so generous that it deals happiness out without bargaining or whether youth itself is so immeasurably rich, so happy in itself that it feels no need of any additional gifts.

"What's that river called?" the girl would ask Pinchuk, leaning forward. "And that village over there? There, see that thatched roof?"

Two days before, at this same early hour, she had left Moscow. The station buildings, vaguely green and silent, had looked strangely clean in the morning light. A fresh warm wind blew freely across the broad asphalted square before the station. Red signal lamps were still glowing far away on the radio pylons, lights garlanding the city streets were glimmering faintly and the clouds overhead were as bright pink as those which

floated in the sky now: up there they were the first to see the rising sun.

Pinchuk screwed up his eyes and glanced carelessly at the forest hamlet slipping behind the trees. As everywhere in those parts the cottages were timber-built, made out of whole logs with a low earth surround, and they looked so picturesque and archaic that it seemed one would only have to open the door to find an osier basket, smeared with clay, hanging on a thong from the ceiling and swaying in the draught, and in it dried pine cones burning brightly as they have burned in our Polesian cottages on winter evenings till quite recently.

"What, are you surprised to see thatched roofs?" said Pinchuk, half-turning towards the girl. His voice was gentle and at the same time mildly patronizing. Both these expressions were to the fore in his manner; his protruding, pale grey eyes wore a constant ironical smile, as if expressing an equal measure of good-will to one and all. "Oh, we've plenty of thatched roofs round here. You'll see for yourself when you get about the district more. Of course, you ought to see the new school at Bratichi too. Two storeys, brick-built, a place a big town would not be ashamed of. Incidentally, I laid the corner-stone myself."

Pinchuk liked to talk about the district. He has lived there without a break since 1945, having come to those parts first six years before when the frontier posts were moved westward and the artificial border which after the First World War had hacked the River Glubin and all Byelorussian Polesie in two was finally shifted.

"Our conditions here are peculiar," Pinchuk went on, aware of the interest in the girl's eyes. "What is the Pinsk Region? Sand and bog and mosquitoes in the scrub. Let me give you a few figures. Up to 'thirty-nine Pan Paslawski lived here, a prince or a count—I don't know. Incidentally, he was considered an enlightened

person. Oh yes, he had the idea of reclaiming a hundred hectares of marshland. A hundred hectares! That was their scale in the Poland of the *pans*. Why, last year alone our region planned to drain four thousand hectares. Instead, we did ten thousand. Hey, Timofei," he said with sudden decision, evidently not able to resist temptation any longer, "let's turn off the road and go to Bratichi. It'll cost us half an hour, no more. There's a little patch of bog I'd like to show you."

The car turned into a bumpy track through alder thicket and carried on for ten lurching minutes.

There was no water to be seen. Nothing but round mounds of earth clothed in bright, almost blue grass. Beyond a small hollow rose a dense field of hemp, a veritable forest of spears shutting out half the sky:

"Is this a marsh?" the girl asked doubtfully, stepping lightly out of the car. "Oh!" she cried out as the ground gave softly under her feet.

"It's all right, you needn't be afraid," Pinchuk assured her. "Five years ago it would have been another thing: cows were drowned here just like that. But now, look at that forest of hemp. They say there are wolves living in it."

With undisguised pleasure he parted the stems of the hemp, which grew twice the height of a man; as he walked he stroked them as he would a horse's withers, drew down the fluffy panicles and rubbed the little snake's-tongue leaves in the palm of his hand.

"You can get drunk by just breathing this. H'm, I didn't know they'd shot up so. A pity. Should have cut a couple down and taken 'em to town. It would have given them something to mention us by."

There was undisguised pride in his voice. It pleased him to be able to tell a newcomer all kinds of interesting things about Glubin. Usually it was quite different: he had but to cross the borders of the region to enter a

world where Glubin and its affairs shrank to insignificance and where the heroes of the day were the canal diggers and the builders of tall buildings. Quite right, of course, but a little hard to take. Not that Glubin had much to boast of: it *was* an out of the way place, seventy versts from the railway line.

"By the way, we had an expedition from the Academy of Sciences here last year," said Pinchuk jealously when they were back in the car. "They excavated an early Slav burial ground. Found a pot made of local clay. Our clay makes very good ceramics. It's the same kind that's used for the facings on Moscow University. But maybe that sort of thing doesn't interest you. Or does it?"

The girl shook her head.

"Is that Glubin?"

The narrow road, black as powdered charcoal, took them along the river-bank which was fairly high at this place. Where the current ran swiftest there was a stripe of a more intense blue with a pattern like the back-bone of a fish. A tributary, no more than a stream, cut right across the road; the car forded it easily. The water that ran along its sandy bed was clear though almost orange in colour. The yearling calves which had come to water might have borrowed that colour for their own coats: they were a rusty red with white patches on their backs and bellies. When Timofei tooted his horn they scattered merrily over the dense green of the pasture.

The car bounced along. Branches of willow, hanging low from the hollow stumpy trunks, stroked the windows. Pinchuk glanced over his shoulder at a cardboard box which had been squeezed so tight into the space at the feet of the girl passenger that these jolts could not possibly harm it. She caught that glance which expressed more vexation than anxiety, and at once her usual curiosity was aroused.

"What's in it?" she asked.

"I've got some medical apparatus for Luchesy hospital. Antonina Andreyevna, the doctor there, asked me to pick it up." Pinchuk groaned with a shade of resigned irritation. "Lost half a day." But, as though recollecting himself, he quickly resumed his benevolent, slightly patronizing tone. "Oh, it's a little jewel, that hospital. They built it a year ago. They've told me at the regional centre: your health services, Comrade Pinchuk, are something not to be matched."

"You know, at first I thought you were Klyucharev," the girl confessed candidly. "Comrade Kurilo advised me to go straight to Klyucharev when I get to Glubin."

"You can go to him or to me," replied Pinchuk with a broad, serene smile. "Oh no, I'm not Klyucharev. I'm Pinchuk, Maxim Petrovich Pinchuk, chairman of the district executive committee. What's your name, by the way?"

"Vdovina, Yevgenia Vasilyevna. Zhenya for short. What a pity you didn't give a lift to those teachers who are coming to your district." She had suddenly remembered them leaping at the opportunity to change the subject and conceal the shyness she felt at having pronounced her full name so solemnly. "There's room in the car, after all."

"Ye-es, that's true," Pinchuk agreed. "I'm sorry myself that those fellows were too proud to come and ask me a second time."

2

The conference from which Pinchuk was returning had ended in the afternoon the day before but other business in the town had kept him from getting away till it was dawn. For one thing, he had to give a talk over the lo-

cal radio. True, he had prepared his text in advance just in case, feeling pretty sure that if not the radio, then the newspaper would take advantage of his presence at the regional capital. After all, regional newspapers rarely sent their people to Glubin, and then only to write a feature story like "Polesian Orchards in Full Bloom" or "Follow the Example of Model Workers."

"Well," thought Pinchuk, modestly, "nothing wrong with that! The main task of criticism is to take a swipe at the dark side of life. The bright side shines from afar by itself."

On the whole he had been pleased with the conference, though, perhaps, it had ended a little too soon: he had not been able to take part in the discussions. Kurilo, the regional Party secretary, had interrupted one of the earliest speakers in his usual abrupt manner and rising to his feet, a massive figure behind the table, had said:

"Home you go, comrades, we've no time for debates. There's work to do."

With a broad gesture he dismissed them all but, catching Pinchuk's eye, beckoned him to stay behind.

Pinchuk walked over to him with a glow of satisfaction. Glubin had just been mentioned several times as a district that was doing well, in contrast, for example, with the Ozersk District. (The Ozersk Party secretary who had been huddling in a corner jerked his head nervously when his district was mentioned, as if instinctively shirking the disgrace of the low figures. Pinchuk, on the other hand, had dropped his eyes modestly as he felt on him the grateful glances of the others present, glances which seemed to say, "We have our aces too.")

"Why didn't Klyucharev come?" asked Kurilo. "Getting too proud, eh?"

"He's ill, Ivan Vakulovich," said Pinchuk with a sigh. "A bit off colour."

"Nothing serious?"

"No, not very," Pinchuk changed his tone hastily: he had detected a note of dissatisfaction in Kurilo's voice. "He says he'll be fit in two or three days."

"Good. This is no time to fall ill. I want to ask you to give a lift to a young lady, a post-graduate from Moscow. She's been sent to our region to do some research: collecting unwritten songs and so on, recording folklore. She wants to go to the remotest places possible, into the very heart of Polesie. Well, Glubin's the place for her. I hear you have your own song-writers."

"Oh, yes. At Blishchuk's place in Bolshany. There was a famous choir there once."

"What's happened to it?"

"To tell the truth, we've neglected it lately. Klyucharev concentrates on the crops."

"He's right there," said Kurilo, looking at Pinchuk out of the corner of an eye.

"That's just what I say," Pinchuk said ingenuously. "Everything in the right order. When we have our song festival we'll give a word to Blishchuk."

"Your district is much too dependent on Blishchuk, I'd say. Incidentally, what are his prospects for this year?"

"He's going in for his second million, Ivan Vakulovich."

Submitting his hand without a wince to Kurilo's bear-like clutch, Pinchuk went slowly down the broad marble-faced staircase. Sometimes, he thought, a friendly private conversation like that can determine a man's fate. He was convinced what counted besides the figures and the facts were personal impressions and that when the time for promotions and transfers came it was those personal impressions that proved decisive.

Thinking about his return journey Pinchuk felt a little vexed with himself for having promised to give a lift to the school-teachers from Minsk, two young people who had only just received their diplomas and who had been

sent to work in his district. Well, there was nothing to be done about it now. They'd have to get down as best they could, by river, maybe. He would have preferred not to have to refuse them bluntly—he never liked doing that—but much to his displeasure the first thing that he saw on coming out were both teachers waiting patiently for him against the high brick base of the porch. They looked mere lads in their unbuttoned, travel-creased jackets. One of them, a dark-complexioned boy, brushed his companion aside with a quick, nervous gesture and stepped forward to meet Pinchuk.

“Are you taking us then?” He spoke in an unsteady, slightly shrill voice that kept breaking. That was probably why his cheeks would suddenly get suffused with an angry red flush.

“Unfortunately not, comrades.” Pinchuk managed to smile and sigh at the same time. “You'll have to take the steamer. I'm taking a comrade from the regional committee. As it is, I don't know how we'll manage with the luggage.”

As if obedient to the lift of his eyebrow the car slid silently into sight from round a corner.

“Listen, Kostya,” said the second teacher when the car had gone. “To hell with them. Let's take the steamer.”

“What steamer?” Kostya broke in roughly. “The one that's been stuck in the shallows for the last two days? What are you talking about?”

He screwed up his eyes after the car and waved the exhaust fumes away from his face.

“Did you pack those historic bast shoes of yours in the suitcase? A pity. We'll leg it. Chapter one: two philosophers on the highway and a bureaucrat in a car.”

“Why d'you label him a bureaucrat all at once?” the second teacher said in conciliatory tones, smoothing down his soft fair hair which rose in a cockscomb with every puff of wind.

"He's a bureaucrat," Kostya replied hotly, "because although he's been in charge of Glubin for nearly ten years he still keeps the place under seven locks and seals, like a principality. Why, you can't get there on foot or horseback. No decent road. No spur line from the railway here. Not even a thought of a regular bus route. Yes, I'll make a point of walking there. It may take me a week but I'll turn up in the office of that famous Comrade Klyucharev at the district Party committee with a pilgrim's staff in my hand. I'll make 'em feel hot under the collar there. Heavens above, I thought old fogies like the Dregoviches and Radimiches still existed only in my diploma work. Well, come on, Vasily!" he concluded in quite another tone, pulling the other by the sleeve.

Vasily was the taller of the two, a narrow-shouldered lad with the pensive, rosy-cheeked face of a girl. Most of the time that face wore a shy, absent-minded expression as if while talking to someone its owner was at the same time listening for something and remembering things.

They walked along a narrow provincial street, past wooden fences that hid gardens and houses with lace curtains stirring in the windows with a breath-like motion.

"Carmen, long have we awaited you," rang out a male chorus from inside one room.

"When shall I love you? I know not myself," a solo voice replied boldly. "Perhaps never, perhaps tomorrow."

The two friends stood listening for some time under that window.

"To hell with all these independent principalities!" Kostya muttered at last. "I wonder if there's such a place as a cinema there at least. Oh, Vasily, we're going to ruin our educated youth in the depths of Polesie. I feel it in my heart."

"That was Davidova singing," whispered Vasily as if awakening. Rummaging in his pockets he brought out a treasured, much-creased theatre programme.

A moment later they were both sitting on the steps of the porch and, forgetting all about Glubin, were discussing enthusiastically the upper and lower registers of Davidova's voice.

3

While Pinchuk's car was not yet halfway on its return journey to Glubin, lorries were heading for the town along all the other roads, each raising its own trail of swirling dust. Those coming from the east carried on their backs reflections of the rosy dawn, others drove straight into the rising sun.

Had not each driver had by his side a worried collective-farm chairman summoned to the district centre by a phone call in the night he would no doubt have been singing at the top of his voice to the accompaniment of his horn. A strong and healthy man simply could not help singing on such a lovely morning.

*On a Monday, bright and early
Rose the sun and woke my girlie.*

But now all the drivers' energy had to go into their fingers and seek expression in the only musical instrument a lorry possesses—the klaxon.

The Bolshany kolkhoz Liberation announced itself in a blaring bass; a driver from Luchesy village, much given to frolicking, performed a series of rapid toots in mimicry of bird-song. The lorry from Bratichi, where people were thrifty, was using the occasion to send a load of firewood to the local hospital: why should the lorry travel empty? The one from Dvortsy—a black sheep of a kolkhoz—raced through its long journey with its empty, loose body jangling and bouncing, intimating its

presence on the road in a voice so wheezy that one might have thought that it was the lorry and not the chairman who had been celebrating the local saint's day all the previous night. That chairman, by the name of Valyushitsky, a young man wearing a faded, creased tunic, now sat nodding in the driver's cabin, a sleepy look on his stubborn-chinned face. From time to time he would open his eyes and glance out of the window as though wondering how much longer he could allow himself to go on rocking vacant-minded on his leather cushion, submitting himself to the driver's will.

They were crossing Bolshany land. Beyond the silvery-green willows that lined the road stretched the fields, some stubbly, others still yellow with the unreaped harvest.

"Blishchuk's taking his time over harvesting," mumbled Valyushitsky with a yawn. "Well, why should he be in a hurry? Next door to the machine-and-tractor station and popular with the chiefs too. Pinchuk will take a combine off any other field for him. Listen, Petro, you'd better drive in top. We're half an hour late as it is. I don't want any extra black marks against me."

The driver smiled wryly, changed up into top gear and, keeping his eyes narrowed on the road with its tangle of dry ruts, said:

"Is it because Klyucharev's found out about the saint's day that he's sent for you?"

"No, it's not that," Valyushitsky sighed. "I imagine he remembers our saint's day from the year before last. He came over in person then to wake folk up for work. Who on earth invented a patron saint for our miserable Dvortsy that's celebrated right in the middle of harvest time? I passed through a good number of places when I was in the army but I never saw anything like that. The churches I saw were modest, quiet little places. But those bells of ours, they go on ringing and ringing like

Pinchuk on the telephone. Enough to split your head open."

He rubbed his hand over his forehead, smoothing the angry furrows, laughed suddenly as he recollected something and shook his head.

"Oh, you should have seen him when he came dashing over early in the morning the year before last! He didn't sleep a wink, driving all night like we're doing now. Went into the office—no one there. Drove out to the fields—not a soul. He knocked on my door, came into the cottage and found a huge straw bed made all over the floor and my father-in-law and all our visitors from the night before lying there snoring and empty bottles ranged on the table."

"And where were you?" the driver asked with interest. He was a comparative newcomer to Dvortsy and there was much that he did not know.

"They had a job waking me up too. My wife found me in a shed. I was drowning my sorrows, comrade secretary, I told him later on. The first day I tried to argue with them, the second day I cursed them, but the third day I shrugged my shoulders and drank a good bottle and a half to the health of that damned saint. I just couldn't stand the thought of all those days we were losing. Drunk or sober, I'd have to answer for them."

"Did he give you hell?" the driver asked avidly.

"N-no. There wasn't time. He chucked a bucket of water over me and off we went, starting at my place and calling at every cottage to put folk to shame and send them to the fields. And everywhere he went he was treated like a welcome guest, given a place of honour and offered a glass of something. Why, they said to him, if you don't accept our hospitality you're no friend of ours, you're no secretary."

"What happened?" the driver asked, giving the wheel a risky twist. Through some strange association of ideas

the delicate situation in which the district Party secretary had found himself seemed to have given him a new burst of energy. "Did he say he wasn't a drinking man?"

"Him? Oh no! He was very angry, though he didn't show it. He got out of it, of course. First, he said, I refuse point-blank to drink to a saint for whose sake the whole kolkhoz hasn't done a stroke of work for three days. Secondly, if I drink your home-brew I'll have to ask you where you got it from. And that would mean trouble with the militia that'll spoil all fun for you for a whole year. And thirdly, I don't recommend myself or anybody else to drink during working hours. Whatever calendars you take your holiday finished the day before yesterday. This being the first time, I'll forgive you all except the chairman. But look out next year: if you want to celebrate your patron saint, then do it on a Sunday and let it last not a minute more than twenty-four hours. And now, comrades, he said, off to work with you. You've got plenty of celebrations ahead of you. The Soviet government isn't against celebrations. But you've got to have pies and pancakes to celebrate with while in your fields the heads of grain are still bowing to each other and asking: 'Seen any sign of the harvesters yet?'"

"H'm, seems to know how to talk to people," said the driver. The same age as Valyushitsky, he was a native of eastern parts of Byelorussia and many of the things he saw in Polesie where collectivization was of recent date reminded him of chapters from Sholokhov's *Virgin Soil Upturned*.

"Aye, this is a wild place," he said, feeling somewhat superior. "These folk live as if the world ends at the edge of their village. In our parts, for instance, in the Vitebsk Region, young people have no sooner finished school than they're thinking of going on to technical school or college or attending courses. But here people have never been farther than Glubin. For them, Minsk

or Moscow might as well be on Mars. They're just abstract ideas to them. They've no interests of their own and don't want their children to learn. If there's a bit of weeding to be done in the garden the mothers don't even let their kids go to school. Spoiling them, is that what you call it here?"

Valyushitsky shook his head. He looked slightly offended.

"How long do you think we've had any schools here at all? That's what you ought to be asking! Do you think I had as much as a year at school myself? The Soviets came here in 'thirty-nine, I was illiterate when I was called up, then I went to the front, lay in hospital and it was there I started to learn a bit. Klyucharev is always scolding me: 'Shame on you!' he says, 'you might at least get the seven-year school certificate.' Oh, if you only knew the way we lived in the old days! There wasn't any iron to shoe the horses, let alone schools. A good thing the earth's soft, a horse is more likely to drown than bruise its hoofs. They even used stone axes in some places. Strike a blow and you'd never know whether it was the axe head or the log that would split."

Valyushitsky made an angry gesture and turned away. His dark, sun-tanned face was set in a grim, bitter expression.

The driver felt guilty for having let his tongue run away with him.

"Ours was none too rich a kolkhoz either, the place I was born at," he said, clearing his throat. "There were times when we had to go to Vitebsk for food. My elder sister worked in a factory there before the war. We used to curse our chairman a lot, and the deliveries to the state were on the heavy side, especially when we ran into debt. And there were all sorts of tractor-drivers: some would merely peck at the soil to save oil

and there'd be nothing to cover the seed. How can there be a good harvest that way? To tell the truth, we were considered the most backward kolkhoz in the district. Like your Dvortsy. But as to going without axes or cloth or leather boots for our feet—it never came to that. And then we had a school and a dispensary, all right and proper. No worse than anywhere else."

Both men fell silent and thoughtful as the lorry bounced on along the uneven road, and the old willows, their heads swaying in the breeze, watched them pass and they, too, perhaps, were thinking their own thoughts.

The sun climbed above the treetops. Gradually the sky became veiled with an ashen haze, the breath of the surrounding marshlands. A barely perceptible odour, flat and sweetish—the smell of rotting vegetation—was wafted now and then on the wind, though all along the road as far as the eye could see there was the green of grasses, the grain stood upright and the ripe flax swung its little bells.

But somewhere in the bowels of the earth cold bad blood still flowed. The district land improvement official, by carving the way for a main irrigation canal, was as it were cutting the very veins of the marshes. Then the stale hidden water began to ooze into the ditches. And the earth that had been swollen, sodden and dropsical, tautened and for the first time felt the strength of its own muscles, and before long the ploughs were tearing at the tough roots of the marsh plants and freeing the soil to be tilled.

"Well." It was the driver who broke the silence. "But how are we going to manage with Dvortsy? Are we going on staying at the bottom of the list?"

"I don't know. Maybe so," Valyushitsky said reluctantly. His eyelids drooped again. Through his eyelashes he looked indifferently at the dusty windscreen. "Didn't

you say it's a wild place? The farmsteads are scattered. People aren't used to sowing grain, they'd rather gather berries or pick mushrooms. The kolkhoz is remote and scattered far and wide. Comrade Lel of the MTS is afraid all the wheels will fall off his combines or tractors before they reach us. Naturally, he sends them to places nearer. Well, here's Glubin," Valyushitsky broke his own train of thoughts and raised both hands to smooth down his hair which had long gone uncut. "Now I'll get it in the neck for being late, and for Dvortsy and for everything else too. Drive straight to the district committee."

4

The conference was to take place in the club, a gloomy red-brick building that used to be a Roman Catholic church. It stood amidst leafy hollow trees and a clammy cold emanated from its wide-open doors; the sunbeams striking through the stained-glass windows and playing on the stone-flagged floor created an unexpected effect of a dusky evening glow. None of the early arrivals felt like going in out of the summer sunshine before the time came and as they waited for Pinchuk they lay around on the grass keeping through force of habit to the side of the yard nearest the Party committee offices, which were a mere stone's throw away, beyond a fence with a wicket gate in it.

Repairs were in progress in the Party office; in the empty building the workers' voices had a hollow ring and white paint splashed through the windows from their brushes.

"What a summer we're having this year! Everything's ripened early in this heat, and all at the same time: One really doesn't know what to harvest first, the grain or the flax." The speaker was a middle-aged bald-

ing man dressed in a neat town suit. He was fanning himself with a folded newspaper. A year before, Danila Semyonovich Grom had been in charge of a regional department; now he was the chairman of a small, straggling collective farm at Luchesy village. He too was sitting on the grass but he had taken the precaution of spreading under him not only a sheet of newspaper but a tarpaulin that he had brought just in case. Somewhere near the horizon a flock of white clouds was gathering.

"Harvest the crop that'll give you a bonus, like Blishchuk does," said Alexei Lyubikov, smiling ironically. Lyubikov, now basking in the sun with his hands crossed under his head, was chairman of the kolkhoz at Bratichi. He had not yet turned thirty. His half-open eyes seemed to be reflecting the summer sky, they were so blue and serene. The deep shadow of the faintly stirring trees crept across his hands and sunburnt brow, patterning them with patches of warm light.

"What Blishchuk does is no law or example for me," retorted Grom, slightly offended by the mockery he detected in Lyubikov's gentle voice. "The Bolshany folk have their way of doing things and we have ours. Blishchuk uses his flax as his trump card...."

"While you like to play on the low cards, is that it? Slow but sure, eh?" another voice interjected.

Grom turned hastily but Lyubikov only slightly lifted his lashes at the newcomer, a short figure with a sharp freckled nose and two tiny specks of eyes. It was Blishchuk himself, the famous Bolshany chairman. He stood, his feet in well-worn boots planted wide apart, brandishing a bunch of flax triumphantly.

"The first cut from the Bolshany crop!" he announced triumphantly in a strident voice.

Lyubikov stretched himself lazily till his shirt clung tight to his hefty back and rolled over on to his other side.

"Your insurance policy for the conference?" he muttered.

It was half a question, half a statement. Blishchuk scowled at Lyubikov for a few moments, uncertain whether to reply.

"It's too soon for you to start picking holes in me, Alexei," he said at last, with a glance out of the corner of an eye at Grom who was new to the district. "Just sit tight and be glad you're not going to be picked on today. All you've got to your credit now is the fact you've pulled ahead of Dvortsy. But what Bolshany does is known as far off as Minsk, and maybe even in Moscow. You'll find mention of us in any newspaper you pick up. Let's try this one."

He grabbed a newspaper off the grass and ran an expert eye down the editorial until he found the place where the model farms were listed, just before the ominous phrase: "On the other hand, there are certain kolkhozes in the region...."

"Aha, here we are! 'The Liberation kolkhoz in Glubin district provides an example....'"

Underlining the sentence with his thumb-nail he cast a proud glance at Lyubikov and then looked with a touch of challenge towards the window of Klyucharev's office.

"Blishchuk's trump card is seen by everybody," he said and waited for a reply.

Lyubikov, however, was dozing in the sun with his back turned, while Grom sat panting, his eyes, red-rimmed from sleeplessness, averted.

"Whatever have they called this conference for?" said Grom, more to himself than to the others. His face wore a tortured frown. "It's bad enough for the chairman to be away but it means a lorry less on the farm too."

"If they've called us here it means they had to," said Blishchuk stolidly, his eyes still on the newspaper.

"Now you've got this job, Danila Semyonovich, the time's gone when you worked an eight-hour day, clocked out and enjoyed yourself. And if a kolkhoz is going to stint its chairman petrol...."

Lyubikov sprang suddenly to his feet and walked off. Just then, Pinchuk's car, like a dusty steed, stopped near the gate and Pinchuk himself, his face still travel-stained, hurried towards the club. As he strode along he drew out of his pocket the twenty-five page copy of the resolutions taken at the regional conference. The sheets were fresh from the typewriter.

The kolkhoz chairmen, tired of waiting by now, streamed to the narrow entrance.

Valyushitsky with a grim light in his eyes cornered Lel, the MTS manager, a powerful-looking man wearing an embroidered Byelorussian shirt and soft leather cavalry boots, and was finishing an unpleasant conversation already at the door.

"That tractor-driver you sent us is just lolling on his back. No, comrades from the MTS, that kind of work won't do. Don't think you can blame the kolkhoz chairman for everything: let the poor chap be hanged for a sheep as for a lamb."

The creaking wicket gate behind Valyushitsky swung open to the hand of a fair-haired man of medium build. There was nothing special about his looks: nine out of ten of the people of Byelorussia have that straight sandy hair, those pale brows, and a complexion whipped by the wind and sun. Between where his hair ended and the collar of his shirt began his neck was as crimson as if splashed with red paint.

"What's riling you, old man?" he asked, tossing a lock of hair off his brow with a habitual gesture.

"I was so mad, Fyodor Adrianovich, I couldn't help it," said Valyushitsky, turning in confusion. "So you're up and about again. Feeling better?"

"Take pity on your nerves. Stay behind after the conference. We've got to have a talk."

Valyushitsky made a bitter reckless gesture.

"Oh, you don't have to tell me you want a talk with me, Fyodor Adrianovich."

5

Pinchuk had deposited Zhenya Vdovina at the door of the hotel, a stoutly built little wooden house sheltered by dense plum-trees.

Zhenya handed in her papers for registration, showed her letter of appointment ("Scientific worker Y. V. Vdovina is hereby...."), and was given the key to a clean whitewashed little room with a single window overlooking a yard where purple burdocks grew among the grass. After a little reflection she went for a stroll through the town.

The afternoon was merging imperceptibly with evening. There was something unusually quiet for her about that early sunlit evening; only the creak of the wood-laid pavement underfoot broke that silence. Zhenya walked slowly, casting her eyes about her and asking the way of the rare passers-by.

Reaching a bridge she stopped, leaned on the parapet and listened to someone singing. The song floated over the river, like a boat, drifting farther and farther downstream....

*Don't you worry, darling wife,
You shall have an easy life...*

a man sang insinuatingly. Through the dusk she could see the gleaming blades of the oars. But was it the

man in the boat who was singing? She could not distinguish.

*The roof of my home is the wide blue sky,
The wind sweeps the floor as it rustles by,
The rain brings the water, the sun bakes the bread
And the silky green grass is my feather bed.*

Were that boat to set out from here for Zhenya's home more than one oar would break in the rower's hand, and long before he arrived the surface of the water would be locked in thick December ice. Zhenya felt a happy surprise at the vastness of her native land.

And later, as she fell asleep in the cramped little hotel bedroom, with a blanket that smelled of common soap and river water drawn up to her chin, this sensation had not left her and in her dreams the past and the present became entangled.

When, six years before, Zhenya had entered the university, Professor Chambinago, who had died since then, was their lecturer on folklore. A stout, dropsical old man with the fixed stare of a sick bird, he would pant up to the rostrum and, cupping his chin in both hands, treat his students in a singsong voice to a series of reminiscences about the last century, about the days of his youth. He used to refer familiarly to the great Russian folklorists: Academician Sokolov, his one-time pupil, he would sometimes call simply Yurka, as if he were a small boy. The students watched him thoughtfully but not unkindly, as they might have regarded the last of the mammoths, surviving on the earth by some freak of nature. They did not share his point of view which was that of an outdated historical school but, all the same, there must be a law according to which every good man passes on his flame to others before his own days are gone.

Zhenya Vdovina, who was ingenuous and impulsive by nature, did not know just when she, a town-dweller, had begun to feel the fascination of the vernacular language, something she knew about, it would seem, only from lectures on dialectology; she was never able to say why village ditties went on ringing in her memory, accompanied by the scent of newly mown hay.

She was still far from being a full-fledged research worker. The first year of her post-graduate work had passed without her distinguishing herself particularly and, more important, without any real difference from her student years. She went on taking exams, she received her state scholarship, did her share of social activities and so far felt quite contented with life.

Her aim was to become a philologist and folklorist, but her knowledge of folklore was mainly derived from books. One, two, even four years passed at the university before she began to think seriously of the future; there was plenty of time yet, she thought—her five-year course seemed an eternity. Oh, how complete her happiness would be when after the term's exams had been taken and a telegram sent to her parents she would trip down the grey granite steps of the main telegraph office and feel she had not a responsibility left! Nothing but the cloudless blue June sky, the splash of oars on boat trips out of town, music in the park every evening....

Zhenya got used to never being alone.

"I don't know what I'll do later, girls, when I leave the hostel," she would say, spreading her arms in comic despair.

She devoted a lot of her time to the Komsomol, trade union, sports; she was on every existing committee; she edited the faculty wall newspaper and whenever a delicate situation arose among the students of her year it was always her they sent to see the dean.

"Use that famous charm of yours, Zhenya," they would say to her as they accompanied her to the very door of the dean's office. And Zhenya would nod reassuringly, shut her eyes as if she were about to take a plunge into cold water and, with a reckless, light-hearted smile still on her lips, enter the dreaded study.

Zhenya had found it just as easy and smooth to become a post-graduate—like advancing to the next year of studies. Why, one couldn't imagine the university without Zhenya Vdovina! No one had any doubts about her ability or her diligence; whether she had the makings of a real scientist remained to be seen: neither Zhenya herself nor her professors knew that.

When she was offered this trip to Polesie Zhenya accepted without a second thought, though the work lay quite outside her programme. But she pored over the map for an evening and was enchanted by the names of the rivers—Glubin, Strumen, Yaselda, Gorin....

She was seen off at the station not, as had always happened before, by a score of her friends but by one person. And as they parted this one person had told her something that made Zhenya unusually silent and thoughtful as she stood smiling through the window.

The platform remained far, far behind. The kilometrage posts slipped past, intensifying the distance. Mast pines, screening the sky, hedged the train in.

As far as the regional town Zhenya had three travelling companions. The tall burly man with deep-set bear-like eyes and a round shaven pate turned out to be the manager of the regional fuel depot. After every dozen words he interjected boastfully, or perhaps it was to invite sympathy:

"We Polesians...."

However, when Zhenya began to talk to another of her travelling companions—yesterday's student, tomorrow a doctor—about people being sent to appointments

as far away as Siberia, the man grew quite offended on Siberia's behalf.

"I come from the Novosibirsk Region myself," he said. "Worked there ten years. Beautiful, rich places those are. There's nothing for you to be afraid of out there, little ladies."

He sniffed and climbed to the upper berth which bulged under his weight. Hanging a chain of ring-rusks on a hook in the wall, he chewed away at them till the end of the journey.

Zhenya sat in her corner, her head cupped in her hands. During those six years at the university she had grown accustomed to the thought that she lived in the centre of the world, in a city about which so many, many songs had been written. What else could anyone want?

When she had been saying good-bye to her friends, they had said to her:

"Don't go native, out there in Polesie, Zhenya. Mind you don't drown in the Pinsk marshes."

Oh no, she wouldn't do that, she had promised in all seriousness. And here she was unable to put in a word to a general conversation. Of course, discovering that she was from Moscow, they would ask her about the tall buildings, the new university. But those questions concerned Moscow, other people's work, not hers.

She felt a sudden stab of jealousy of that stout manager who had full right to call himself both a Siberian and a Polesian.

"Here I am, twenty-three years old," she reflected, shutting her eyes at last, for night had fallen and she could hear the even breathing of her companions. "I'm a Komsomol member, I'm a post-graduate, I'm quite happy. So why this sudden feeling of being ashamed of something, of feeling sorry for myself?"

A white summer moon, veiled by the clouds, was running a race with the train. The new coach smelled of paint and the wheels rumbled sternly: tak-tak-tak.

... And now here she was in Polesie, in the land known once as Black Russia, a name not to be found even in atlases.

In the wide-open ventilation window a silver star twinkled, like a little fish caught in a dark soft net.

6

The bulb in Klyucharev's office glowed so feebly that everything around floated in an orange haze.

Of course, the people gathered in the district Party secretary's office were smoking a lot and the white curtains, stirring a little in the draught, kept out the fresh flower-scented air of the starlit evening.

Sitting in there on hard chairs, their coats unbuttoned, were Lyubikov, MTS manager Lel and Grom who as usual was fanning his sweating face with a newspaper.

Blishchuk had just left. They heard his car shoot away from the front porch at a prohibited speed; two bright headlights sweeping the whole length of the street caught the windows like searchlights.

The small room that was Klyucharev's office was the only one in the building which the house-painters had not yet reached. Here stood the safes and bookcases from all the other offices, making it difficult to move without barking one's shins on a piece of furniture.

It would have been difficult to say whether the talk that was going on there was a continuation of a difficult working day or a friendly chat between a group of men resting and smoking and digging each other in the ribs. But even the jokes and laughter turned on

the same subject—machines at the MTS, the harvest, the threshing....

Valyushitsky stood at the window, his temple pressed against the frame. He took little part in the conversation. From the morning onwards he had been meaning to catch a moment to go up to Klyucharev and say, "Please remove me from the chairmanship: I'm not up to it."

He looked at the familiar room with a gnawing feeling in his heart: he probably wouldn't be seeing much of it from now on. And although it was usually to get a scolding that he came here, he always left the place feeling encouraged and cheered by the hum of human activities which resounded from morn till night in the district Party offices like the noises within a sea-shell.

"You're always going for me, Fyodor Adrianovich," Lel was saying with a wink of his ever-cheerful eye, as if turning his own words into a joke, "but what would you do to me if our combine harvesting was as bad as it is in some other districts in this region?"

Klyucharev swung round sharply. There was not a trace of fatigue or indisposition on his face now.

"Listen to me! I'll remember this. That's what you're boasting of now! You're hardly struggling through your plan, and that's low enough."

"We'll do it all right," Lel said stubbornly. "I'm talking about the other districts."

"Where d'you think you're working?" Klyucharev asked amid the general laughter. "Tell me, now."

"Oh, I work here, in Glubin, under your leadership." Lel made a gesture of comic despair but across his blue close-shaven face darted an expression of such utter weariness that Klyucharev looked hard at him for a moment.

"I know, Lel," he said in quite a different tone, "I know you worry about everything as much as I do, and about the tractors even more than I do, as fits your po-

sition. What's more, you have the right ideas. In other words, we've all developed enough to understand what our district needs today. But when it comes to turning those ideas into action, and acting quick on them—those are things we don't always do."

"I understand," Lel said softly, raising his head and looking Klyucharev straight in the eyes. "I understand that."

He seemed to be waiting for Klyucharev to say something more, but Grom drew him towards the door: Lel had promised to give him a lift back to Luchesy in the MTS car (Grom, of course, had not been able to see his lorry "standing idle" and had sent it back to work hours before).

A sudden quietness fell on the room after these two left. Lyubikov also made to go but Klyucharev detained him, picked up the telephone receiver, asked to be connected with his home and waited a little for the reply.

"I forgot," he apologized suddenly. "My family left today. I wanted to invite you to supper."

"No, thank you, Fyodor Adrianovich, I must be off. It's a long drive to Bratichi. My wife's expecting me back."

Klyucharev suddenly fell silent; he seemed to have lost the thread of the conversation. He ran the fingers of his hand through his hair.

"All right, go," he said at last. "Remember me to Shura."

His voice sounded gentle and intimate.

Valyushitsky again experienced a vague sense of bitterness: it was as if everything Klyucharev did or said that day was directed against him.

As he shook hands with Lyubikov, Valyushitsky felt momentarily ashamed too, of himself, of Dvortsy. How much he would have liked to change places with Lyubikov so as to be able to leave with an easy conscience and his head high.

But the door closed and now that he was left alone with Klyucharev, Valyushitsky turned with embarrassment to the window and drew back the curtains to let a little fresh air into the room.

"Are you afraid of difficulties, Semyon?" Klyucharev asked quietly, breaking the silence. He felt a little poorly again and sat with his hands pressed to his temples.

In his excitement Valyushitsky mechanically unbuttoned the collar of his tunic. The red of his shirt smote his face and against it flashed the bluish whites of his eyes. From the moment he saw Klyucharev that day he had meant to ask him to relieve him of his chairmanship and thus spare himself the shame. But now he replied quietly:

"I've had my difficulties. But life wouldn't be worth living if a man was afraid of difficulties."

"What do you consider was the hardest time in your life?" asked Klyucharev thoughtfully.

Valyushitsky gave a faint sigh, his brows met in a frown. "It was when I was a kid, when we had the *pans* here. You know I was left an orphan very young—went hungry—in rags—the village was poor."

"Yes. Well, we still have poor villages in Polesie even now, in Soviet times. That ought not to be."

Valyushitsky picked at the scab of an old blister on his hand.

"I'm finding it a bit hard," he muttered, well aware of what the other was referring to.

"And where d'you think it's easy?" retorted Klyucharev. "What we're doing now is to make things easier in the future."

"I understand that, Fyodor Adrianovich. But I'm barely literate and I can't cope with the job. What's more, I'm afraid of losing my Party card over Dvortsy. You gave it me yourself."

Valyushitsky's head dropped low. A lock of hair fell over his eyes.

Klyucharev said nothing. The ceiling bulb glowed in fits and starts. Now it would cast an almost white light on Klyucharev's lowered forehead and straight fair hair, now it would suddenly fade till the little red worm-like filament could be seen trembling inside the bulb.

"The main thing's my lack of education," said Valyushitsky, who found the silence more oppressive than a reproach.

"But you have guts, haven't you, man? And you know a lot about farming, don't you?" Klyucharev asked hotly. The very sound of his voice was a relief to Valyushitsky. "Why, you're a local man, you know every beam in the cottages round here, not to mention the people. As for your Party card, it wasn't given you to hide from difficulties. It's not a decoration you've got lying there in your breast pocket, Semyon. You're finding one kolkhoz hard to run. What about me? Give me your advice. Share my troubles."

Valyushitsky looked fixedly at the floor. He was so excited that Klyucharev's words reached him in waves: sometimes they seemed to fade, sometimes they struck deep into his consciousness.

And Valyushitsky's thoughts were flowing in uneven bursts too. The words "the village was poor" conjured up a whole picture before his mind's eye: a thatched cottage with darkened walls and himself an unwanted orphan standing in the unheated cottage, and the moaning listless voice of his sister singing over the cradle:

*Not a saucepan, not a ladle,
My o me!
Just a baby in a cradle,
Me o my!*

When his sister had married she brought her husband no more than this shabby cottage and her songs; her trousseau was a pair of home-made earrings hacked out of flat tin in the shape of an ace of diamonds.

"I've always listened to you and I'm grateful to you for helping to make a man of me," muttered Vallyushitsky. "All I'm asking for is to be able to study...."

"You'll have to make do with evening school for the time being. Work and study at the same time, like we all do. Now, I promise the district committee will give you special help: both moral and material. But, mind you, I demand more from you than from others, Semyon, because I am fond of you and I'm responsible for you more than for the others. You see, I can't let you stand apart from the great things that are being done, from our great struggle. Did you ever hear of a hundred thousand tanks being concentrated in one place during the war? Well, now a hundred thousand combines are sent to the virgin land. Just look, town girls are giving up their homes and families and going off to live in tents and reap grain."

There was a knock on the door. Klyucharev turned his head sharply. He looked annoyed.

"Ah," was all he said when the district committee driver came in and handed him a key.

"Raisa Stepanovna asked me to give you this. She nearly took it with her by mistake."

The driver was little more than a lad. He stood at the door, showing his strong teeth in a smile, and waited for questions.

Only then did the men realize how late it was. There was not a sound to be heard in the corridor beyond the open door. A cold night draught blew in through the window.

"Well, did you see them off all right?" Klyucharev asked absent-mindedly, mechanically turning the key in his hands and feeling the bit with his finger-nail. "They didn't miss the train?"

"No, they caught it all right," the driver started. "Nice comfy carriage with reserved berths. Raisa Stepanovna got a lower berth, Gena an upper one. He asked me to tell you he'd return earlier, in time for school."

"Yes, Gena will be coming back earlier," said Klyucharev, rummaging among the papers on his desk.

"So they've gone to their relatives like last year, to see how the old folk are," the driver went on vaguely. Then, suddenly remembering, he drew out of his bosom a thin magazine folded in two. "Here's something else. Raisa Stepanovna took it but didn't have time to return it. She said that when we went to Luchesy we were to give it back to Antonina Andreyevna."

He glanced at the cover hesitantly, not knowing whether to keep the magazine or hand it over to Klyucharev. But Klyucharev held his hand out.

"That's all right, we'll take it," he said hastily, without looking up. "It isn't urgent, is it?"

He thumbed through the magazine, running a slightly incredulous eye over such headings as "Pleurisy," "Prevention of Throat Infections" as though wondering what could have interested his wife in the paper, when suddenly a semitransparent sheet of cigarette paper slipped from between the pages and floated like swan's down across the room, avoiding all hands.

On it was the drawing of a dress, executed with a few strokes in the manner women usually adopt when they are trying to solve the mysteries of a model ignoring all other aspects of a drawing. No puzzle here: simply a green dress which Dr. Antonina Andreyevna wore

and which the wife of the district Party secretary was probably making for herself. Why, indeed, shouldn't those two women have some interests in common?

"Our Dvortsy folk will still have a good word to say of Antonina Andreyevna every now and then," said Valyushitsky, picking up the sheet of tracing-paper and handing it to Klyucharev. His smile was itself a tribute to the doctor's memory.

No wonder. In days gone by Valyushitsky himself had been treated by spells cast against Old Mother Fever, against Lord Thunder and Lightning and the evil eye. "Begone, evil eyes, begone to the moss, to the marshes, to the swamps and the dry forest.... There are the graves where the sun has no heat, where songs are not heard, where geese do not cry...."

Antonina Andreyevna's astonishment can easily be imagined when she, fresh from graduation, heard this dismal chant being wailed over the bed of some sick soul at Dvortsy. This dark-haired girl with the grave expression would walk into the cottage with a firm even tread; her professional smock, whiter than the first snows of winter, bore with it an astringent odour of medicine, like the scent of midsummer herbs. More than one of the old wives of Dvortsy looked at her from their corners with frightened admiration: could not this beauty have come from those remote parts—far from Polesie—where the sky draws so close to the earth that women hang their washing on the horns of the crescent moon?

"Ah yes ... Antonina Andreyevna..." Valyushitsky repeated thoughtfully.

But Klyucharev was still busy with his papers and did not raise his head. At last he finished with them, drew himself up to his full height and passed his hand over his eyes as if removing invisible cobwebs which blurred his vision.

"Are you staying in town overnight?" he asked Valyushitsky. "Why not sleep at my place? There's room."

But Valyushitsky shook his head vigorously. His reminiscences were over, the cares of the day returned. "No, Fyodor Adrianovich, I must be off to Dvortsy," he exclaimed, and Klyucharev knew that there was no need for any parting words. He simply shook the other's hand firmly and said:

"Well, all the best."

He made a mental note: "Eighteen months ago Lyubikov had nothing better to start with at Bratichi. Nothing better."

CHAPTER TWO

BRATICHI, A YEAR BEFORE

1

Lyubikov had not been considered to be much in the fore in district life then. He had come there in '49 to join his brother, the head of a local trades cooperative, had registered with the Party organization and, being an educated fellow but of no great initiative, was given temporary charge of the Party study-room. He remained there for two years. Collectivization had only just been introduced in the district and then came amalgamation. The remote hamlets and thatch-roofed farmsteads of Polesie had to take in one stride the distance the rest of the land had passed in twenty years.

The first tractors came and drove deep furrows in the marshy, almost virgin soil. But that was only a beginning. There were twenty kolkhozes in the district and each one was a world in itself, a separate planet with its own gravity, its own velocity. What Bolshany had

achieved in one year was still not to be thought of in Luchesy, Bratichi or Dvortsy.

"Don't worry, Fyodor Adrianovich," Pinchuk, always one to look on the bright side of things, used to say to Klyucharev, "we've got two millionaire kolkhozes—the first in the region—and that means we're showing results. No one's asking more of us at this stage." That was a year ago.

Pinchuk made it a rule to adopt a friendly attitude to the people he had to work with. An experienced old administrator, he was whole-hearted in his readiness to extend a helping hand to Klyucharev when the latter, previously a lecturer at the regional Party committee, was elected to the post of first secretary of the district Party organization. He was even willing to bear with Klyucharev's restless, awkward temper: time would knock the rough edges off him. But time passed and Klyucharev's approach to work did not crystallize; somehow it did not fit into the usual mould, and little by little Pinchuk found himself observing Klyucharev as it were from outside, watching him make his way and waiting for him to run into a snag as, of course, he could not but do, sooner or later.

There was a time when Pinchuk thought Lyubikov was going to be the snag.

In those days the chairman of the Bratichi kolkhoz was a taciturn, morose-looking man, who rarely spoke at district conferences, only opening his mouth if someone asked him a direct question. He turned in his reports late with the excuse that he was barely literate himself and did not trust others with these things; yet he always accepted the orders of his superiors without question thus endearing himself to Pinchuk. When Bratichi was set a programme of livestock raising that was obviously beyond its capabilities that year, the chairman did not even flinch. That winter he ran short

of fodder, the cattle died, but all the same he found a way out in the spring....

When Klyucharev discovered what had happened he clutched his head with despair. That happened in the break after Pinchuk's two-hour report at a district conference. Klyucharev rose to his feet, his face almost as red as the cloth on the table before him, and said in a voice shrill with anger:

"What d'you think we're given plans for, comrades kolkhoz chairmen? D'you think it's only for the sake of being able to report on the right day, to clear oneself of criticism and sit through that day in peace of mind? Or do we have to look farther? Are we seriously trying to build up our agriculture? Pinchuk read out the list of results; Bratichi, it said, had fulfilled its livestock plan. That way of fulfilling a plan is something I wouldn't advise my worst enemy: they put eighteen-month-old calves to the bull and spoiled the herd. Why, you've got to stand them on the table to milk them. A litre a milking's all they give—why, a goat would be ashamed of that! Oh no, comrades, it isn't funny. It seems to me the chairman of Bratichi values a day or two's peace and quiet higher than the interests of his kolkhoz. And if that's the case I don't imagine the kolkhoz can think much of that sort of chairman."

The sharpness of Klyucharev's conclusion took the meeting by surprise. For a few seconds people sat silent, as the words sank in; then a few people started clapping. The applause grew louder and louder.

"You're a bit hasty with your decisions, Fyodor Adrianovich," said Pinchuk when the two men were alone again after the conference. Pinchuk forced himself to speak in a gentle, friendly tone though it cost him a great effort—he still felt on him the eyes of the whole audience as Klyucharev had said, "Pinchuk read out the list...." "I admit the Bratichi chairman was wrong

and thoughtless, but he was trying to fulfil the plan, wasn't he? Doesn't that vindicate his actions?"

"He behaved like a criminal," Klyucharev snapped as he strode through the pitch-black puddles.

As always in spring Glubin was being flooded with melted snow, and that evening the single street light swaying on its tall post was reflected in dozens of puddles.

"A criminal? That remains to be proved, Fyodor Adrianovich. And, believe me, you won't be able to prove it. Anyway, people don't have their heads chopped off for a single mistake."

"Depends on the mistake," grumbled Klyucharev. He quickened his pace, but Pinchuk's road lay with his almost all the way home and, willy-nilly, the conversation would have to go on. "If the mistake's an accident, something that happens when a man is trying to do his job, then I understand and I can forgive it. But if it's for the sake of submitting a paper...."

"Paper? Are you calling the plan a paper?" exclaimed Pinchuk with something like horror in his voice and a mental note to himself that Klyucharev's words were worth remembering. "You're raising your hand against the holy of holies, Fyodor Adrianovich," he went on after a pause. "If we stop obeying the plan implicitly then what'll happen to discipline? What'll happen to the state?"

They had reached the bridge. The lamp light did not extend this far. They stepped at random on the planks of the pavement; as the wood bent under their weight they heard the water splash against it, and realized that the river had overflowed its banks.

Klyucharev stopped and looked hard at Pinchuk. But all he could see of the man's face was a vague white blob. There was no chance of reading the man's thoughts from that.

"Well, Maxim Petrovich," he said softly, "if all we Communists do is to obey, obey implicitly as you say, without giving a thought to how to correct or improve our plans—what do you think will happen to the state then?"

Night comes early in Glubin. As soon as darkness falls there is not a sound to be heard in the street. Even the light from the windows of the houses does not reach the streets, for the windows are tightly screened with shutters.

The two men—the two on whose shoulders rested the responsibility of running the district—stood silent in the dark. They could hear the river, swollen with the joyfulness of spring, surge playfully past the bridge.

"You're saying strange things, Fyodor Adrianovich," Pinchuk spoke at last. "Very strange indeed."

Without another word the two men continued on their way, and, once over the bridge, parted.

Next morning, however, within a few minutes of reaching his desk, Pinchuk rang up Klyucharev's office.

"Well, are you still of the same mind about Bratichi?"

He sounded buoyant, refreshed.

Yes, said Klyucharev, he was still of the same mind. In fact, preparations would start that very day for the election of a new chairman.

"I see. And I suppose you've given a thought to who will take his place. We're not too well off in that respect, as far as I know. Or have you got someone up your sleeve?"

No, Klyucharev had no one up his sleeve. He had only the forty thousand people of the district to choose from.

"I can't make you out. What are you—a pessimist or an optimist?" Pinchuk's voice mounted ironically. "Who's your candidate, if it's no secret?"

Klyucharev replied that the district Party committee was going to recommend Lyubikov.

"Lyubikov? D'you mean the one in the Krasny Luch co-op? That drunk? Why, we're always having to keep an eye on him."

"No, not him. Alexei Lyubikov."

"The librarian?"

"The head of the Party study-room."

Pinchuk was silent for a while.

"You should know, of course," he resumed. "But in my opinion, it's not wise. That fellow's been working at Bratichi for a couple of years. He knows the conditions there. Besides, we ought to promote local people. You know our instructions."

"I know only one instruction: to strengthen the kolkhozes and provide people with decent living conditions. That fellow at Bratichi will never make a good manager. I've had my eye on him for a long while. He doesn't care about anything and he's cowardly."

"Well, well.... All right, then. Let it be Lyubikov."

It was, of course, a risky step to put at the head of a weak kolkhoz a young Communist who was completely without organizing experience. Yet everything Klyucharev knew about Lyubikov spoke in his favour. Moreover, the situation at Bratichi brooked no delay. In every job, big or small, is needed not only experience based on written instructions but also intuition. And a Party worker, maybe, requires it more than any other. Klyucharev could not always explain why he sometimes did not send a man packing at once, trusting him, while he would kick out another, although the second man might, in a strictly formal sense, have more in his favour than the first. But only in a strictly formal sense.

Klyucharev puffed nervously at his cigarette after that phone talk with Pinchuk. He was thinking things

over. Pinchuk, after all, had the common sense of an experienced administrator. Pinchuk's point of view was simple:

"He may not be quite so good, but he's someone I know and am used to. I'll make allowances for his weaknesses but he'll make up for that in other ways and pull his weight. He won't let us down."

"Leonty Ivanovich," Klyucharev called to the second secretary in the adjoining room. "You're not going out anywhere yet?"

The day was just beginning. Leonty Lobko, looking as if he were about to jump up any moment, sat on the edge of a chair at his desk and whisking through his papers jotted things down on scraps while he purred to himself in complete absorption:

*Naughty Mister Nightingale
Pinched the cuckoo by the tail.*

He broke off for a second, his eyes glued to a few lines of text, and reflected, his fingers drumming a rhythm on his brow. Then he whisked through the pages again until he found the one he required, and resumed his ditty in a deep bass, like the gurgling of an over-heated samovar:

*Cuckoo, cuckoo, don't you cry,
Your tail will heal up by and by.*

Lobko was a strange man, puny of build and balding at forty. He was taking correspondence courses at some institute or other and when he toured the kolkhozes always took with him his text-books. He made frequent trips to Minsk and sometimes even to Moscow for his exams. Locally he was considered a clever if rather queer fish though on the whole he did not cut much of a figure.

"Well, Fyodor Adrianovich, that volume of Mao Tsetung's works has arrived," he said, turning as he heard Klyucharev come in. "While some of the comrades are studying it individually I want to go through it and make a résumé and discuss it with the kolkhoz Communists. I trust you have no particular duties for me during the next few days."

"I have not, Leonty Ivanovich. I want to have a word with you about Bratichi. We spoke about Lyubikov, remember?"

"H'm, we did."

Lobko laid in his book the scrap of paper he had just torn off the calendar pad and looked at Klyucharev with a merry, quizzical expression.

"Why, has Comrade Lyubikov's record taken a turn for the worse in the past twenty-four hours? Has someone found out that he has a maternal great-uncle who sold buns in his own shop forty years ago?"

He was the first to laugh at his joke as he knitted and unknitted his fingers in a habitual gesture.

"No, he's an orphan pure and simple," said Klyucharev, smiling too. "The point is that he's no experience in our sort of job and . . . well . . . we don't know how it'll turn out. Bratichi is a difficult village."

Lobko looked up into Klyucharev's face, still with a twinkle in his eyes, and, opening the book, touched the book-mark.

"The past is the past. If one has time, one can celebrate successes and analyze mistakes. But each of us goes into the morrow as on a sea-voyage—in discovery of a new land. No one is born into his place in life. Even Pinchuk began at his mother's breast, not in the office of the district executive committee, I'm sure of that. Whose fault is it that Lyubikov has been stuck in Glubin for two years and we still have no idea what he is capable of doing? And maybe he was born to be a kolkhoz chairman?"

“But what if he wasn’t?”

“But what if he was?”

“Leonty Ivanovich,” Klyucharev pleaded. “Don’t think I’m against Lyubikov. Pinchuk just rang me. He’s worried. He says I’m acting rashly.”

“And may we never know this ugly common sense,” said Lobko, his arms chopping the air to the rhythm of the words. “That’s Mayakovsky. The best and most talented poet of our times. Or don’t you agree?”

Klyucharev laughed with that special warmth that Lobko always aroused in him. There he was, sitting on the edge of his chair, cheerful, fussy and shrewd. Klyucharev could not but feel how lucky he was to have such a second secretary and good friend, though, as a matter of fact, they had never seemed to find the time to have a heart-to-heart talk.

“Every Communist should have a clever heart, not only a clever mind. What makes you think Lyubikov hasn’t got a clever heart?”

The ventilation window slammed and the door creaked ajar. Despite his frail appearance, Lobko loved draughts.

“‘You must temper yourself like steel,’ ” he hummed, glancing with keen satisfaction at the window. Outside, the wind was waving the bare brittle twigs.

The days had grown noticeably longer. Spring was in the air. Though the snow was still falling sometimes it was the light, hurrying snow of early spring.

The ruddy-cheeked, dark-browed face of the district committee’s instructor showed itself at the door.

“Come in, Snejhko,” said Klyucharev. “We’re talking about that friend of yours. We’re thinking of making him chairman of the Bratichi kolkhoz.”

“Alexei Lyubikov?” Snejhko shook his head doubtfully. “Think he’ll cope with it? They’re a difficult lot, those Bratichi folk.”

"That's nothing to worry about. Difficulties are our only salvation. Nobody ever learned anything from an easy life."

"Why not?" exclaimed Snejhko, his eyes suddenly agleam, his hand cutting the air recklessly. "Alexei's spent too long running in low gear. He's tough enough to be carrying sacks of flour but instead he's been sneezing from the dust of his papers for the past two years. He's been living single long enough. Let's marry him off."

Snejhko went out.

"Just now you were almost paraphrasing Pavlov," Lobko said to Klyucharev. "Someone asked the old man what is the main condition for reaching the goal. Pavlov answered: the presence of obstacles. Faced with an obstacle the reflexes are sharpened and then a man is capable of doing things.... Remember?"

Klyucharev scratched his head in embarrassment: he admitted frankly that he had only a general idea of Pavlov's theories. So Lobko moved to a hard armchair and after wiping his spectacles carefully like a lecturer facing a well-filled lecture hall began to tell his single listener about the eminent Russian physiologist.

Meanwhile, Pinchuk was yielding ground reluctantly. He did not like rows, he tried to avoid head-on collisions, but, on the other hand, if Klyucharev made a mess of things in the district would not he, Pinchuk, a man of experience who had been sent to these parts immediately after their liberation, be held responsible?

As a precaution he first sounded the opinion in the district itself. He too sought Lobko's advice.

"Tell me frankly, Leonty Ivanovich, do you always understand what Klyucharev is up to?"

"Up to? When? Where?" asked Lobko absent-mindedly.

"Well . . . he's a bit abrupt in his decisions," Pinchuk began, carefully. "Headstrong, you might say."

Lobko listened with close attention for several minutes.

"It's a good thing you are weighing up a man so carefully, that you're trying to understand his character," he said at length. "You see, I think Comrade Klyucharev has now reached that important stage in a man's life when his whole store of strength and feelings demands an outlet in some practical application. Everything that has been accumulating imperceptibly over the years through the inertia of growth, you might say, reaches its limit. No, I'm wrong," Lobko interrupted himself, "I shouldn't have said limit. I believe there's no limit to the development of man's capabilities. Do you believe that?" The question was sudden.

"I do," said Pinchuk dejectedly.

"And that's specially true where the field of activity for man's capabilities is as broad as it is in our land," Lobko went on, getting carried away. "You see, however far ahead we get, whatever successes we score, for a long time there'll still be parts of the world where everything is just beginning: soviets and kolkhozes and the birth of the new man. There are today whole continents that are still asleep. A man is born, drinks his cup of woe with its few drops of joy, and dies—in utter ignorance of what he is capable of doing, of what he might have achieved. Communism," Lobko said in quiet, solemn tones, "communism is the unfolding of the whole man, the revelation of all that he is capable of, that's what I think."

The eyes behind the spectacles were shining, the close-shaven face was lit by a shy, pensive smile.

"Leonty Ivanovich," said Pinchuk, "we're practical workers, you know.... Sometimes there's no time to draw breath. But don't think I'm not grateful for the talk. . . ."

"How the fellow talks!" thought Pinchuk as he left the room. "One more crack-pate in the district."

The result of this talk, however, would have greatly surprised Lobko had he known of it. But as it turned out, he left a month later for one of his usual exams and never returned to the district, being transferred to a post in the regional town. And so the Lyubikov story unrolled without his participation.

What happened was this: that very evening Pinchuk started a long letter to the regional Party committee accusing Klyucharev of ignoring the opinions of others, behaving in an arbitrary manner and committing sundry other mortal sins. Pinchuk collected his facts day by day, he was in no hurry. He listed them dispassionately. He was no enemy of Klyucharev's, mind you, he merely considered it his duty to draw attention to these dangerous signs.

The regional committee reacted by sending a commission to Glubin where it started reading the minutes of meetings that had taken place for the last two years. But spring was fine that year, the sowing campaign was successful and Klyucharev (together with none other but Pinchuk) was the first in the whole region to sign the report about the end of the campaign. The commission expressed its full confidence in the first secretary, and left.

Kurilo, the regional Party secretary, disapproved of squabbles in the territory he was responsible for and did not let the matter go any further; he merely sent for Klyucharev and in his usual gruffly genial manner said:

"What's all this about? Can't run in harness with your soviet, can you? Why is it complaining about you? What have you done to Pinchuk?"

"Nothing. Just happens we have different views on certain things. Incidentally, I didn't know it was he who'd complained."

Kurilo looked at him shrewdly out of the corner of his clever bear-like eyes and scratched his chin thoughtfully.

"M'yes," he said slowly, "we still have some of that sort that go around with a pencil and jot down every little thing that goes wrong. What's more, it's all true: facts, dates, witnesses. All true . . . and yet all wrong, that's the point. Pinchuk probably thought he was being a model of vigilance, the chump."

Klyucharev said nothing.

"Maybe I'd better move him somewhere else?" asked Kurilo. There was still a searching note in his voice though the look in his eyes was friendly.

"Oh no, let him stay," Klyucharev said firmly after a moment's thought. "Especially as it's a matter involving me personally. Anyway, I'm not so touchy as to expect everyone to like me. All it means is that I didn't manage to convince him I was right."

This conversation was unpleasant to Klyucharev. He was in a foul mood as he made his way home from the town. He had a feeling that he had been over-scrupulous and that by this he had closed the way to a serious talk with Kurilo on the principles involved, with the result that Kurilo saw the whole Pinchuk incident in the wrong light, simply as a personal quarrel.

"Well, never mind, never mind," he assured himself for the hundredth time. "As if the most important thing is to justify yourself to your superiors. Why, it's really all the better that Pinchuk's staying on. He can't be my enemy, after all. He's not a quarrelsome fellow by nature. He'll come round."

As for human failings, Klyucharev was, of course, not immune from them himself. For all the sharp penetrating edge to his character there was a soft side to him; he suffered when other people made mistakes, he felt deeply wounded—though he concealed it well—when he encountered stubborn ill-will, taking it to be primarily

a sign of his own incompetence—and how he longed to be competent!

Klyucharev nursed the secret ambition of improving himself together with his district; and he wanted the improvement to be real, not only apparent. He knew very well that a whole district does not place its confidence in a man merely because he occupies a responsible post. Klyucharev held the position of the leading figure in the district; well, he wanted to be really worthy of that rank. He wanted to be the first to whom people brought their sorrows and their joys, the man to whom people came with open hearts and not only with files and folders.

2

And so, Klyucharev ignored Pinchuk's warnings and Lyubikov the "librarian" became a kolkhoz chairman.

At first things went very badly at Bratichi. The kolkhoz which had been among the average ones dropped at once to the category of the laggards. "Dvortsy and Bratichi are birds of a feather," Blishchuk cracked, and the phrase ran round the district.

Lyubikov was on the move from dawn to dusk rushing about his farm, which sprawled along the banks of the Glubin. Everywhere he went he ran into hidden pin-pricks, sometimes into open disobedience. His blue eyes sank deep into their sockets, he went unshaven for weeks. One night he felt so desperate that he sent a messenger with a note to Klyucharev: "I'm at the end of my tether. Feel like shooting myself."

Klyucharev arrived on the following morning and spent a week at the kolkhoz.

Spring was just coming in and the skies were overcast. The floods had not yet subsided. In the Glubin and the Pramen the water stood level with the banks

and spread like a dull wavy mirror over the low-lying meadows.

Klyucharev sent his car back to Glubin and went on foot, clad in a canvas raincoat and heavy high boots. He knew these parts very well. Bratichi was not really a village but a number of farmsteads strung out along the Glubin. Leaving the main kolkhoz buildings—a few sheds hastily constructed out of old logs—he set out to visit the teams. Lyubikov stayed in his office. By the way the new chairman had dashed out to meet him at the sound of the approaching car, splashing straight through the puddles as though he were escaping from a burning house, Klyucharev realized that things were bad. And there was no reason to try and create an impression of superficial prosperity, with Lyubikov showing his visitor round the kolkhoz with managerial pride. Lyubikov himself was a stranger there. The local people met him with guarded hostility. His very appearance, his half-grown beard, his shabby old military coat, did not suggest a man who could be popular with people who were prejudiced against him as it is.

“Where d’you sleep?” Klyucharev asked him.

Lyubikov led him into a small room at the side of the chairman’s office, more like a storeroom than a living-room. A wadded jacket hanging from a nail in the wall, a mug of cold tea, a saucer brim-full of cigarette-ends—that was all this room had to show.

“Left your wife in town?”

“What else could I do?” said Lyubikov with a gesture akin to despair.

Without a word, Klyucharev picked up the saucer and tossed its contents through the ventilation window. The draught swept some of the ash back into the room, filling it with a depressing, acrid smell.

“Lost your head, guardsman?” said Klyucharev quietly. “Surrendering, eh? In retreat?”

"Me? Fyodor Adrianovich!" Lyubikov choked, his lips trembling strangely.

Klyucharev suddenly wanted to put his arms over the young man's shoulders and hug him silently as a soldier sometimes does to a comrade before a difficult operation or after a feat of arms. But Lyubikov's feat had still to be accomplished.

"I'll come back for dinner. Arrange what you can. And tidy the place up a bit too." Klyucharev glanced at the walls, at the plank trestle bed with the crumpled cotton pillow. A stern smile suddenly flitted across his face. "Well?"

Later, when he was walking alone, picking his way beside the muddy road, stepping on mounds of dry soil that were thickly covered with the matted grass of the previous summer, he finally found the words which he would not probably have been able to say to Lyubikov aloud—warm words of encouragement: "Aye, Alexei, it's hard for you. There's no denying that. It's very hard."

He passed many log cottages with thatched roofs which made them look rather like mushrooms. Now they were far behind him though he could still hear the village dogs barking after him. He walked on under the overcast sky, swinging his arms in military fashion and limping more than usual on his game leg (when he was in company he trod more carefully). "What I need is the key. The key to this land and to men's hearts. The word 'communism'? Is that it? The future? But who will believe in the future if I don't show them at least a tiny bit of it? And why hasn't Bratichi taken to Lyubikov, a decent, honest man? Why?"

A silent cloud was creeping on him from behind. Klyucharev saw the veil of distant rain streaming from its edge. The river's surface darkened, the grass grew dull. A biting wind got up. The cloud swirled, broke into pieces, lashed by the wind, and rolled on, dragging

wispy shreds of grey. Now the cloud was clearly visible in all its layers: leaden-hued down below, a light smoky grey on top.

"Hop on. I'll give you a lift, stranger."

Klyucharev turned to the voice.

At the reins of a horse-drawn vehicle—a boat on wheels—sat a peasant in a grey army-cloth cap.

"Why, Comrade secretary!" the man cried joyfully as he drove up, and added sternly as his brows rose: "Jump on, secretary. Rain has no respect for rank. Or aren't you going my way?"

Klyucharev sat on the gunwale of the boat which served as a kind of seat in the vehicle and, feigning a sigh, said:

"Ah, Comrade Skulovets, it seems you and I are going the same way till the end of our lives."

They exchanged glances and suddenly burst into laughter so loud and unrestrained that the skewbald horse pricked up its ears.

"Eh, that's a good one," said Skulovets, wiping the tears from his eyes. He coughed with laughter into his straggling beard and kept darting sly inquisitive glances at Klyucharev.

"Tell me, secretary, in God's truth, are you bearing me a grudge? I know you won't show it but tell me, are you bearing me a grudge in your heart?"

"Why, Prokhor Ivanovich, I'm gladder about you than about anybody else!"

"So you didn't forget my name," said Skulovets quietly.

"Not likely!" Klyucharev muttered. "Why, I'm a sort of godfather to you, though I didn't stand at the font when you were christened."

Again they exchanged glances and laughed, though more quietly this time.

"There's something I've always wanted to ask you: what was that book you were reading on the bridge?

Must have been interesting. All I could hear was you turning the pages over."

"Don't remember. I was turning the pages but I was thinking of something quite different, damn it. I was thinking of you, Comrade Skulovets."

"Thinking bad things about me, weren't you?" Skulovets sounded anxious.

"Very bad, then," Klyucharev admitted.

"You're a man who knows how to keep his feelings to himself, Fyodor Adrianovich."

They fell silent. Each was thinking involuntarily of those distant times (though, in fact, only three years had passed) when Klyucharev had been sent to the district by the regional Party committee to explain collectivization which was then being introduced. Klyucharev had gone from house to house, talking to people and reading them the newspapers. But he had been regarded with suspicion. Some people on seeing him approach slipped out to avoid trouble. Klyucharev would wait patiently for them to return. To while away the time he would make toys for the children and even teach them songs, though his voice was weak and unmusical.

One day, when Klyucharev came to Skulovets's cottage, the latter left the house under Klyucharev's very nose.

Klyucharev called to him. Skulovets did not reply, merely quickened his pace down the path. Tired and angry, Klyucharev followed him stubbornly. On reaching a bridge over a half dried up stream Skulovets scrambled down the bank and sat in the shade. Klyucharev stopped on the bridge, in the sun. He opened a book. The hours passed. Two clouds of cigarette smoke, one from under the bridge, the other from above, floated in the still air.

"You'll go away, agitator, curse you, you'll go," Skulovets thought to himself almost without anger as he heard the pages of the book being turned.

"No, I won't," Klyucharev answered him silently. "I'll stay here if I don't eat all day. We'll see which of us can hold out longer."

When neither of them had any tobacco left and a damp evening mist was beginning to rise, Skulovets called:

"Shall we go back to my place?"

"Let's," said Klyucharev willingly.

Skulovets came groaning up the bank to the bridge.

"Got anything to smoke?" he asked, looking at his visitor for the first time.

Klyucharev showed him an empty tin. Skulovets shook his empty pouch.

The thick milky mist was waist-high, concealing the ground as they walked back to the cottage.

"Let me lead the way," said Skulovets. "It's boggy here. Take a false step and you'll break your leg. Where did you hurt it?"

"At the front."

Skulovets walked more slowly.

"Stay the night with us. I'll take you on with my horse tomorrow morning. Where are you going?"

"To Pyatigostichi farmsteads."

"Your chiefs don't seem to spare you much," grumbled Skulovets. "Hurt in that cursed war, but what do they care?"

Three years had passed since that day.

"So now you've come to believe in kolkhozes, have you?" Klyucharev asked Skulovets.

Skulovets cleared his throat noisily and wiped his beard.

"I believed in you all right even then," he said at length. "But I've still got to see what these kolkhozes are like."

He brandished the end of the reins in the air, glanced at the dark sky, and his face became as grim as everything around.

"Prokhor Ivanovich," said Klyucharev after a few moments' silence. "What's the sense in us playing hide-and-seek with each other? We're old friends, aren't we? Tell me frankly: what's wrong here? Are you displeased because the chairman was replaced? Are you sorry he's gone?"

"Like hell we are!"

"What is it then?"

Suddenly the rain began to come down in drops as big as though someone were spilling silver coins from a purse. Klyucharev pulled the hood of his coat down low over his eyes, and could no longer see the road ahead. Skulovets, whipping up the horse, turned at once into the nearest farmyard. He stood the horse under shelter. The two men went indoors.

"Hallo there, Melanya! Can we come in?"

"Cross yourself first—this is a Christian house."

"Good-day, Granny."

A few minutes later they were sitting round a well-scrubbed plank table, sipping hot milk and tossing hot potatoes, baked in their jackets, from one hand to the other.

Skulovets had removed his cap: his stiff hair was heavily streaked with grey.

"How shall I put it, Fyodor Adrianovich?" he said, picking up the thread of the conversation started on the road. "Every wrong has its beginning. A big river starts in a little trickle. The first thing that offended us was something silly.... Well, it was like this. After you'd left we made our applications and held a meeting to decide what name to give the kolkhoz. The fellow from the district centre kept looking at his watch. 'Any name you like,' he said, 'only be quick about it. Call it The Dawn

if you like, or Sunrise, or The Morn of Life. Or, better still, call it after some hero or scientist, only not Budyonny or Michurin. We've already got kolkhozes named after them in this district.' Well, we remembered what you told us about the Kuban, about the machines and the combines there. We wanted to have a name of our own, maybe not such a good one, but something we'd think of by ourselves, you see. Do you think we were wrong?"

"Of course, you were right. Quite right. What was your suggestion?"

Skulovets stole a swift glance at Melania; the old woman was pursing her lips and shaking her head: useless talk, she was thinking.

"'Let the Machine Hum.'"

"What?"

"Well, you see, so we'd have machines here at Bratichi too," Skulovets muttered in a wretched voice and moved his hand to suggest something like a propeller turning.

"I say, that's a fine name."

"Well, it didn't go."

"Why not?"

"Fellow from the district centre said it wouldn't do. He said it had no ... er ... no ideological content." Skulovets evidently had some difficulty in remembering the phrase. "He said we Bratichi folk were always troublesome. One never knows what we're going to do next. A kolkhoz isn't a circus, he said, it's a serious business. Call it after Chapayev, he told us."

"Chapayev was a good man."

"I am not saying he wasn't. But it made it look like we weren't our own masters in the kolkhoz, see? We're not sending you a chairman for the time being, the fellow told us, we suggest you elect the poor peasant Andreyan Shagida. We just shrugged our shoulders: what was

the use of telling him about Andreyan? If it's our kol-khoz, then let it be really ours, but if it's his, then let him name anyone he likes."

Klyucharev dropped his half-eaten potato as if he'd burned himself and started pacing the room excitedly. The blood mounted to his forehead as always happened when he was angry. Skulovets narrowed his greenish eyes and watched the Party secretary as if waiting what he'd do next. Old Melanya, a black kerchief knotted tightly under her chin, started clearing the table. Her face still wore that stern accusing look.

"Well, there are your small things for you," Klyucharev was thinking as he walked up and down. "That damned patronizing attitude over every little thing! It drives all the good-will out of people."

"But why couldn't you come to see me, Skulovets? You know me, don't you?"

"I thought you bore me a grudge. And then, you'd become a big chief," said Skulovets, a sly smile in his eyes. But, noticing that these words hurt Klyucharev so that all blood drained from his face and he choked with anger, he at once turned serious.

"I really would have come to you, Adrianych. I meant to see how the new chairman would fare and then I'd have come. I would by all means."

Now that the talk had come round to Lyubikov at last, Klyucharev heaved a deep sigh and sat down on a bench.

"Well, and what was it you didn't like about the new chairman? You voted for him, didn't you?"

Skulovets shrugged slightly.

"It's all the same to us who you send...."

A heavy silence followed these words. The room grew darker and darker as the clouds gathered. Old Melanya swilled out the bowls, wiped them with a rag, put them away and stood with her back to the white-

washed stove, a tiny, dried-up old woman in an ankle-length skirt and a loose blouse.

"Where have you ever seen seed thrown into mud?" she suddenly burst out. "The new chairman says we'll dig a dyke and sow grain on the marsh. He wants to send us all begging."

"Oh no, Granny. You'll drain the marsh first, you'll take chemical fertilizer to it and you'll see what fine soil it'll make. Now, in the Okhryansky District, at the Lenin Kolkhoz, for instance...."

"You won't grow grain on marshland," said the woman stubbornly.

"At the Lenin Kolkhoz in the Okhryansky District...."

"Listen to him, Melania, just listen...."

Melania gave Skulovets a scathing look.

"I've got to water my cow, not to hearken to fairytales."

And, turning sharply, she went out, carrying a bucket. Klyucharev followed her with his eyes.

Melania stood on the porch before the dense curtain of rain, sighed and suddenly fell into a reverie. An empty cottage—no grandchildren, no sons or daughters.... She had once been a woman like a tree in full leaf. Now she was an old dry branch. Five children she'd born—and not one left. Her daughter had died in her first confinement, in a stranger's home. Her son had been driven off to Germany.... What had happened to him there no one knew. Three she'd buried young. The Lord giveth, the Lord taketh away.... Aye, He'd taken away all right, but what had He given?

The cow, sensing the approach of its mistress, mooed from the shed; the old woman took a shawl from a nail, flung it over her and hurried across the yard. When she returned to the cottage the men were talking calmly and looking each other close in the face.

"Another thing, Fyodor Adrianovich. The teams ought to be reshuffled. Take ours.... What did Andreyan do? He took a piece of string and measured on the map. If your cottage was near the grazing ground it meant you were in the livestock team; if you lived at the other end you were put in the field team. All Bratichi used to go to Anton Strekha for seedlings. Lovely cabbages and tomatoes he had. But because he lived on the wrong side he was put to work with the horses."

"Let's go to the team," said Klyucharev, glancing impatiently out of the window.

Spring showers are short. They have but one duty: to wash the snow from the fields and clean the sky like a window-pane. The wind was already sweeping with its broom through the rain clouds, driving them from the March sky.

"Let's go, let's go," Skulovets willingly agreed.

At the door, after they had bade good-bye to the old woman, Klyucharev turned to her again.

"Do you know how badly your new chairman lives, Granny? No one to cook for him, no one to do the washing. What if you took pity on him and let him lodge with you for a while? Later on, when he finds somewhere, he'll bring his wife over from Glubin."

"Just the two of them?"

"There's a small boy."

"I've room enough for three," said Melania, pursing her lips. "A young man ought not to be long apart from his family."

They drove off splashing through the ruts of the previous year of running water, like little streams.

With jerking pencil Klyucharev jotted down some notes on his memo pad: "1. Ring up from the kolkhoz office to the film distributing office at the regional centre. Tell them to have the film *Chapayev* flown to Bratichi immediately. Ring again tomorrow. Ring every day till

it comes. 2. Help Lyubikov select people for an excursion to Lenin Kolkhoz, Okhryansky District. Include Melanya by all means. 3. Get a land improvement expert here to stay a fortnight and deliver a lecture. 4...." Klyucharev glanced over his shoulder and whistled.

"Here's another monster of a cloud chasing us."

Skulovets was about to whip up the horse but changed his mind and turned his head. Stirred by his talk with Klyucharev about the "right things" he felt as though he were being carried forward by the wind.

"Don't worry, Fyodor Adrianovich, sometimes a dark cloud has a silver lining."

They reached the piggery from the side nearest the woods. Skulovets tarried a little, tying the horse to a post, and Klyucharev went ahead and swung open the door on its rusty hinges. The place was half-dark inside and so dirty that Klyucharev felt his gorge rising as his feet slid on the liquid muck.

In the room where the pig-feed was prepared the roof leaked and through the ceiling the sky could be seen, belted with a rainbow. There were several women seated on packing-cases, their heads bound by kerchiefs which they wore low on their brows. Two men in shaggy sheepskin coats—one clad in rubber boots, the other in bast shoes—leaned smoking against the blackened wall. At their feet a sleeping dog lay curled.

The women, almost all of whom were young, at once began to exchange playful smiles and were willing talkers. The two men kept silent, watching Klyucharev quizzically.

"What are we doing? Nothing. We just hang around," one of the girls exclaimed, her hands akimbo.

Klyucharev smiled brightly:

"This is the first kolkhoz I've been to where the pig-tenders don't complain of overwork."

"Why should we complain? We don't go to work in the fields and the chairman doesn't come to see us. So we just live for ourselves, like individual peasants."

"Who told you that?" Klyucharev's keen ear caught a note of mortification in the challenging manner of the girls.

"Everybody does. Always throwing it in our faces."

Klyucharev became serious.

"I know your work isn't seasonal. If it rains the field workers can't get in the harvest but you have to be on the job whether it rains or snows, and on holidays too."

The girls looked at each other and sighed. The one who had spoken first, a little older and more spirited than the others, said:

"We're going to apply for a change. Let others do this job. We've had a year of it and that's enough."

"No, there's no need to do that," Klyucharev said gently. He watched the girls unobtrusively. "Listen, there's a kolkhoz called Victory in the Kursk Region. There's a milkmaid there who had milked a million litres during her life. She's worked nineteen years with cows. Now she's been decorated. So she's got renown, respect too.... Why shouldn't you do as well?"

The girls unconsciously made those subtle movements of the shoulders and brows that only women know how to do when they want to show they aren't to be trifled with.

"We look after the pigs all right," one of them said hesitantly. She wore her kerchief so low that it concealed her eyebrows; her cheeks and chin were covered too, only her eyes, corn-flower blue, full of surprise, were visible.

"No one wants to work with the pigs," one of the men broke in sharply, as he ground his cigarette-end under his rubber heel. "You can't earn anything for hay-making here, there's no bonuses. Well, this new chairman

now. Sure, he doesn't drink and he tries his best, but the chairman alone can't cope with things. Now you've come. Thank you for that. But you'll get into your car and that's the last we'll see of you."

"Oh no, it isn't," said Skulovets in a loud voice from the door, coming forward and striking his boot with the butt of his whip with an independent air. "He'll come again."

Klyucharev turned and smiled at him out of the corner of his eye with silent gratitude.

"I certainly will," he said, "and I'll bring the chairman with me."

He walked round the feed stove and examined it with the keen eye of an expert.

"By the way," he said as he went, "you needn't wait for the chairman before you put a bench in here, so you don't have to prop up the walls with your backs. Incidentally, what's your norm of feed for a sow here?"

"We give 'em as many potatoes as we dig up."

"I see."

Klyucharev burst into a sudden light-hearted laughter. Everybody looked at him with astonishment.

"Here you are thinking that things couldn't be worse than they are now. And do you know what I'm thinking? That from this day on everything's going to be different and that we'll do it all with our own hands. Now let's go and have a look at the pigsties. Come on!"

He splashed recklessly through the puddles, breaking up the reflections of the rainbow mirrored in their surfaces. The doors were ajar: broad shafts of daylight and streams of fresh spring air entered the building unhindered and maybe this made everything in there seem even dirtier and uglier. Klyucharev stopped at the entrance and looked around.

"Of course there's nowhere to get feed from if you didn't make provision for it last autumn. And you can't

build a new piggery in a month or two. But, my dear young women, haven't you got rags and buckets and a few brooms? Couldn't you whitewash the walls?"

"There's no chalk to be had," growled the man in the rubber boots who turned out to be in charge of the place. Klyucharev cut him short with an impatient gesture.

"All right. We'll bring you some chalk with Skulovets. This very day. Agreed, Prokhor Ivanovich?"

"There's no need for that," said one of the women, shamefaced. "We'll manage ourselves. But say we wash the place, what happens next? That's what we'd like to know."

"Next?"

Every feature in Klyucharev's face radiated a restrained enthusiasm; and everyone moved in close to him.

"Next we'll make the chairman repair the roof of the feed-room and lay a new floor. If there's not enough material we'll send you some from Glubin. Then we'll get together and reckon up all the fodder we have and work out a ration. That means we'll have real figures in our hands when we go to the kolkhoz management: this is what we'll need this year and this is what profit the piggery can bring to the kolkhoz."

"But who's going to trust us, who's going to listen to us?" asked the other man in a timid querulous voice. He was a short, puny fellow with the humble look of one who has endured long years of poverty. His blue eyes met Klyucharev's only for a second and then dropped, as if he was afraid of the sound of his own voice.

"What's your name, Uncle?" said Klyucharev quietly. This timid downcast figure looked so much like a relic of days gone by that the word "Uncle" slipped from Klyucharev's tongue although the man was probably not much older than himself.

The man moved his lips in puzzled bewilderment.

"Prika, Sofron Prika," Skulovets replied for him, with a straight, grave look at Klyucharev.

And again Klyucharev thanked Skulovets tacitly. Between the two men had already been established that private understanding which promises other, closer relations to come. Klyucharev took a pace towards Prika and placed himself between him and the others so that the two of them remained alone, as it were.

"Sofron, it was so that the people would be trusted that the Soviets were set up here. You asked who was going to listen to you. The kolkhoz chairman will listen to you, I will listen to you, the whole country will listen to you if you work well."

He laid a hand on the man's bony shoulder and looked deeply and searchingly into his eyes. Then he turned sharply to the others and said:

"So that's settled, comrades. I'll have a word with the chairman and the day after tomorrow I'll come back here myself, and so that people should really believe we're not only grousing and complaining but that we can do a job of work too, you put this place in order by that time. And then we'll ask the chairman for the things we need."

Klyucharev walked the whole length of the piggery and back. The second half of the building had only been roofed; nothing was ready inside. Some of the previous year's hemp hung over the beams under the rafters.

"What a lot of hemp you've got here! Why don't you fray and sell it?"

"We need it ourselves," muttered the manager of the place whose name was Grechka. "We need ropes to hobble the horses and other things too...."

Later, when they had moved on and left the piggery behind them, Skulovets turned to Klyucharev and in that

earnest friendly tone which he now used when he spoke to the Party secretary, said:

"You know, I don't think they trust you yet, Fyodor Adrianovich."

"I know that," said Klyucharev, nodding firmly. "When we come back the day after tomorrow, maybe you and I will have to carry the buckets ourselves. But I don't think so. No, we won't. There's nothing people respect more than work, so long as you can touch them to the quick. And if you do that they'll go not only to the management, they'll go to the government itself and not feel shy about it." He suddenly fell silent and his face twisted in a grimace almost as of pain; Skulovets guessed unerringly that he had recalled Prika.

"He was a pauper, used to beg for alms," he explained with some hesitation, not quite certain whether this was what Klyucharev expected him to say.

But Klyucharev looked at him with interest and Skulovets livened up.

"He's a meek fellow: goes wherever he's sent without saying a word. Six children but he hasn't a proper house. When the Soviets came he was given one but it was burned down in the war and now he lives in a dugout. Doesn't complain, though.... Fyodor Adrianovich!" Skulovets resumed after a short pause. He cleared his throat nervously but as he continued he warmed up to his subject. "What if the kolkhoz were to build Sofron Prika a cottage? It'd give him a new start in life, wouldn't it? D'you think he's a half-wit or what? Not he! Set him on his feet and you'll see he's as good a worker as any other. He can work like a horse, he can."

Skulovets twitched the reins; he waved his whip over his head. He was possessed with an ardent glow of unselfishness but because for some reason Klyucharev did not reply soon enough to his suggestion he felt

uneasy. Pulling on the reins he glanced over his shoulder at his companion.

“Have I said anything wrong?”

“No, you’re right,” Klyucharev replied, fighting down the feelings that surged in his own heart. “You’re quite right, Comrade Skulovets. It’s simply that I’m happy to see you’re beginning to realize what a collective farm really means.”

With Klyucharev’s help Lyubikov’s wife Shura moved to Bratichi on the very next day.

Small, trimly built, as nimble as a girl, Shura carried her bundles into old Melanya’s cottage, declining all help, and chattered nineteen to the dozen the while. Her voice was confident, brooking no argument, and her favorite expression was: “In a jiffy.”

“Oh, we’ll manage that in a jiffy,” she declared in a businesslike manner as she glanced at the old sooty stove.

And before Melanya could object, Shura, her things not yet properly unpacked, was busy mixing up chalk in a bowl and was putting on the stove one long wet stripe of whitewash after another.

Little by little Melanya was drawn into this lively fuss. Her cottage shed years under her very eyes. It was filled with the acrid smell of whitewash; the well-scrubbed alder-wood floor which the old woman had trodden for half a century suddenly appeared in boards of different colours: one board of a bluish white, with yellow ones on each side of it, another the colour of melon, then one as pink as unripe beetroot.

The kolkhoz chairman himself, Alexei Lyubikov, humming songs of the war, refitted window-frames of knotty smooth-planed wood.

The living-room was swiftly decorated with embroid-

ered towels and floor-mats, and photographs in carved frames. On the table the samovar was replaced by a glittering nickel-plated electric iron. As Shura placed it in full view of everyone she said:

“I’ll not say a word for a year. But if we don’t get electricity in the kolkhoz by spring next year ... look out, Alexei.”

“Maybe you’d like to have a TV set next year too?” grumbled Lyubikov good-humouredly.

“Why not? We’ll have one in a jiffy.”

Melanya eyed her new lodgers with boundless curiosity. She couldn’t make up her mind: was she going to like this life, so noisy, so open to all?

She sighed out of habit and drew aside the Lyubikovs’ three-year-old boy Volodya to treat him on the quiet to a soaked apple. But no sooner had the little boy taken a bite than he dashed over to his parents with a delighted yell, and they too took bites, real bites, not merely pretending, so that the whole room was filled with the crisp sound of crunching teeth.

Before Melanya had time to criticize them mentally for this the lad bounced over to her and enquired anxiously:

“Would you like some apple, Granny?”

He had his father’s round trustful eyes but his stubborn brow was his mother’s. So as to leave something for the little fellow himself Melanya went to the larder and brought a bowl filled with her treasured Antonovka apples still redolent with the odour of the previous year’s fresh snow.

The floor was still damp from the scrubbing, odd pieces of furniture were being arranged, but on the window-sill a pot of geraniums stood behind the lace curtains kindly beckoning to passers-by with its red flowers: “Good people have moved in here, people you’ll need in Bratichi!”

That evening, when Volodya and old Melanya had gone to bed and their peaceful breathing mingled with the hissing of the kerosene lamp, Klyucharev and the Lyubikovs went on sitting together at the table round a tea-pot going cold. Shura was sewing a sheet for Klyucharev out of two narrow strips of calico and now and again the needle in her nimble fingers flashed in the warm flickering light. She listened attentively to the conversation; sometimes, when she caught her husband's eye, she smiled at him encouragingly.

"The main thing you need now, Alexei, is to form a group of people around you," said Klyucharev. "But when you choose them don't depend only on other people's advice. Use your own judgement. Watch your man unobtrusively, get into conversation with him about all sorts of subjects, ask his advice as if by chance and give him things to do. Then—but only then—when you've formed your own opinion, go and talk to the board of management. And, by the way, it's not such a bad thing if they too understand from the very beginning that you're not a man to be led up the garden path and that you know your job."

Klyucharev wanted to smoke but Shura told them they could smoke only on the porch. Klyucharev, however, was loth to leave the warm cosy room even for a few minutes: the day's work had left him tired and chilled.

Shoving his packet of cigarettes deep in his pocket Klyucharev looked at the Lyubikovs with approval and a little enviously. His own wife was a woman of altogether different character. Shura's peace of mind and happiness expressed themselves in the best possible way: she was constantly and inexhaustibly buoyant and lively. She never grumbled, not even in fun, never indulged in jealous sighs, never cast melting, submissive glances at her husband. Her assurance that life was giving her what she deserved—and wasn't that the way

it ought to be with everybody?—made her whole being glow with a steady inner light.

Beside her Alexei did not look the awkward fellow Klyucharev was accustomed to seeing at Glubin. His eyes were keen, and his face looked lively and intelligent. Now Klyucharev could not have said to him as on the previous day: "Surrendering, eh? In retreat?"

Lyubikov was not in retreat. He was drawing up his plan of battle, taking in every word of the Party secretary. He was already in the grip of that excitement that feels like a cold breeze coming into your heart from the future, which Klyucharev himself knew so well.

Next morning Skulovets arrived early. For a long time he discussed something in a whisper outside the door with old Melanya. His feet crunched the thin icicles that had formed on his boots at that early morning hour.

"Shall we drive to the piggery, Comrade secretary?" he asked casually, putting his head round the door.

"Did you think I'd forgotten?"

"No, I was just passing by."

When they reached the piggery everything looked quiet and deserted.

A few young pigs were wandering idly by the roadside: the sun had brought out fresh grass on the mounds of earth. But the two men were in no mood to enjoy the beauty of early spring.

"Well, let's see how enterprising Lyubikov's been," muttered Klyucharev, glancing around. He had left his raincoat at the cottage and was wearing a semimilitary tunic with patched elbows and a cap pulled down low over his eyes.

Skulovets realized that what worried Klyucharev more than anything at this moment was the fear that

his words had fallen on deaf ears. And he too began to feel hurt and anxious on Klyucharev's account.

They walked slowly towards the piggery, heavy at heart. Suddenly Skulovets said quietly:

"Look, Fyodor Adrianovich!"

Out of one of the small windows stuck a bast brush.

They halted as if to a command, stared at each other, looked back at the wet brush dripping with whitewash, and laughed soundlessly.

As they entered the piggery the acrid odour of chlorine met their nostrils.

Grechka, his legs rubber-booted as before, a cap pushed back impatiently from his sweating brow, was fitting boards in the last pigsty. Sofron Prika had a hack-saw humming in his hand, and a fine stream of sawdust as dry and clean as November snow was pouring on to the ground.

Klyucharev's appearance did not bring the work to a halt. People just turned their heads and looked at him in unconcealed triumph. "Our word is steel," their looks seemed to say.

"You really are beauties, girls," Klyucharev exclaimed with genuine enthusiasm, looking at the young women who were dusted up to the eyelashes in dry lime. He breathed easily now, the smell of chlorine no longer bothered him. "But I thought there were more of you?"

One of the girls whose surprised eyes and childish peeling nose he remembered from his previous visit gave a scornful sniff.

"One went away."

And then all the rest joined in with sharp mocking laughter:

"She's taking care of herself beside the stove."

"Fat lot of good that'll do her. The worms'll get at the idle fool, like they do at toadstools."

"I see." Klyucharev looked around, infected by their vigorous energy. "Did the roofer come?"

"Yes, he came. He's bringing the shingles today."

"Well, this is better. Anything else you need?"

"Lots of things, Comrade secretary."

CHAPTER THREE

ON THE ROAD

I

Maybe there are some who looking from a distance think that life in a country district is like still water under riverside willows. But even the stillest water has its rapids.

The midday sun shines hotly, the lazy mosquitoes have settled in the undergrowth close to the sodden roots; the river is smooth and calm on the surface as if it is dreaming, but hidden springs break through its bed and thrust new jets resiliently through the sunny water to break the surface in silvery rings, large and small.

On the morning after her arrival at Glubin in Pinchuk's car Zhenya called at the district Party committee to have her papers stamped.

She had little difficulty in finding the tin-roofed bungalow. She was directed to the first secretary's office. But she had come at an awkward moment: Klyucharev, scowling with anger, was reaching for his cap. He had just been looking at a field of maize at Bratichi; of its forty hectares over ten were all but ruined, the plants looking painfully weak and puny. The field would have to be weeded without delay. In search of Lyubikov to whom he wanted to suggest this measure Klyucharev

had gone to the kolkhoz offices. The big room with a heavy office cupboard and a bucket of brackish well-water in the corner was full of tables. Behind the tables six women sat bent over ledgers. A corner near the window was occupied by the only man in the room, an elderly grey-haired accountant with spectacles. He was totting up figures on an abacus.

"Comrade bookkeeper, who is in charge of all this bureaucracy? You?"

"Yes," said the man with contrition.

"One, two, three..." counted Klyucharev. "What if we hang a padlock on the door of your office with a note saying: 'All gone to weed the maize field?' It's got to be saved somehow."

"Why not?" said the bookkeeper, springing jauntily to his feet. "I'll go with pleasure, right away."

The women remained silent, bending their heads lower over their ledgers.

"Why don't they give us an allotment and let the school children and holiday-makers help too?"

"That's settled, then?" said Klyucharev. "Tomorrow morning you go to the field. And if anybody has some business with the office, let him go to the field to find you. And you, Comrade bookkeeper, as chief of the weeding team, will make the fellow weed a patch before you stamp his papers."

Klyucharev came back to Glubin only to collect the chief agronomist of the MTS and was now on his way elsewhere.

"Will he be away long?" Zhenya enquired when Klyucharev's car shot off in a cloud of exhaust fumes. "Oh, he doesn't spend much time in town, does he? Well, thanks for telling me."

She was determined to wait for Klyucharev, him in particular, not Pinchuk, though she knew Pinchuk well enough already.

Sometimes it happens that a person has just had an idea of something when it comes true, as though his thoughts had been overheard. The trouble is that it sometimes comes true upside-down.

Next day, when Zhenya had just risen and gone out into the grass-covered yard to wash at a shiny copper wash-stand, she heard a motor-horn blowing in the road and saw Klyucharev at the gate. She recognized him at once though now he looked much younger to her. His face, however, still wore that irate look, as though he had got out of bed with it still there from the day before.

"Want to drive over to Bolshany with me?" he called to her from the gate. "It's not always you can get a lift there in anything decent."

"Now?" Zhenya's wet hands uncertainly touched the summer frock which had served her as a dressing-gown for the last three years.

"Oh, we're not fussy about clothes," said Klyucharev with ill-concealed irony. "But I ought to warn you, if you're afraid of catching flu...." He sneezed demonstratively. His face looked parched and cold.

Zhenya went for her things without another word.

When they were in the car Klyucharev said:

"You'd better show me your papers, after all. Who are you that they had to ring us up about you during the night? A relative of one of the regional chiefs or what?"

Zhenya, who with an independent expression on her face took up her handbag to look for her papers, froze suddenly and said with astonishment:

"What chiefs?"

"Kurilo, for instance. Is he a relative of yours?" Klyucharev turned and looked hard at her. "Are you his daughter? Niece? Sister-in-law?"

"No. I'm no relative of his," Zhenya faltered.

All the brightness drained out of the joyful summer morning. To think that there were such people in this world! With something akin to hatred she looked at Klyucharev's sunburnt neck, at the smooth close-clipped back of his head. "Well, never mind," she thought. "I'll put up with him for an hour or two. I won't need his car after that. I don't need anything."

She gazed stubbornly out of the window but the occasional willows that lined the road were not very exciting.

"Stop," said Klyucharev suddenly to the driver. The man braked hard. "Sound the horn."

There was nothing on the road. Among the bushes at the side Zhenya saw a little hut made of branches, but this too was empty.

"Go on, toot away," Klyucharev said impatiently.

The driver sounded the horn like mad.

Suddenly from somewhere in the bushes there came hopping and hobbling an old man wearing bast shoes and home-spun trousers with bright blue patches on the knees. He carried a cap, full of mushrooms.

"Is this the way you do your job?" shouted Klyucharev, his face crimson. "What d'you think you're paid for? For mushroom-gathering? D'you expect the cows to sound a horn to you too?"

Why was he shouting so? Zhenya wondered, feeling increasingly hostile to Klyucharev as she looked pityingly at the dejected old man. A few of the mushrooms fell to the ground, but he made no effort to pick them up.

"I wasn't far away, Comrade secretary."

Klyucharev merely chopped the air with his hand, and they drove on.

They had already driven some distance from the scene of this unpleasant incident when Zhenya summoned up her courage to ask:

"What, actually, is the matter here?"

Klyucharev replied through his clenched teeth, without even turning to her:

“Quarantine. Foot-and-mouth disease.”

So that's what it is, thought Zhenya. Well, she couldn't be expected to know everything, could she? He might at least answer politely.

Once again Klyucharev told the driver to stop, this time to pick up a young man with a bandaged arm. The man sat beside Zhenya, squeezing himself modestly into a corner. Klyucharev began to speak to him at once:

“You'll be attending evening classes this autumn, won't you? You're old enough to be at the Institute, Myshniak. Like your work? Remember how your mother cursed me that time?”

The young man jerked his head in confusion and stole a sidelong glance at Zhenya. Again she was conscious of being an outsider and there was a painful feeling in her heart. By now, of course, she would rather bite her tongue off than ask Klyucharev anything.

But to her astonishment Klyucharev chuckled and told her the story himself.

It had happened two or three years before, when young people were being sent to the first courses of agricultural mechanics to be organized in the region.

Myshniak's mother had run wailing after the lorry which was taking away her eldest son with the precious slip of paper from the district Party committee in his pocket.

“Oh, misery, misery! A curse on your mother, secretary, for taking away my son. May your mother perish and your children know nothing but woe!”

“Mother, mother,” shouted her son, his face as red as a brier bush in autumn.

Some ten months later, as he was walking through the village, Klyucharev was stopped by a young man

in a good town overcoat and shiny galoshes, a get-up much too warm for the time of year.

“Don’t you recognize me, Comrade secretary? I’m Dmitro Myshniak whom you sent to the courses. Come and see us. Mother’s laid the table, she very much wants you to come.”

“Sure she won’t start cursing me again?” asked Klyucharev.

“Oh, how can you think such a thing?”

They walked to the cottage. Myshniak’s mother, her best apron on, her face flushed from the heat of the stove, met Klyucharev with a look of contrition.

“What’s the use of raking up the past?” she said. “The Lord knows which words should enter the ear and which go unheeded. Try the honey, Comrade secretary. Do please sit down.”

Recollecting those scenes Klyucharev now asked Myshniak:

“How did you hurt your arm, boy?”

Myshniak sighed and looked guiltily at his bandaged wrist.

“On the threshing-machine. My own fault for being careless. Doctor Antonina Andreyevna says it’ll heal in a day or two.”

“Have you been to see her just now?”

Klyucharev turned his head, his eyes momentarily blank, as though he had strained them looking too hard at the road ahead.

“That’s right. I’ve been over to Luchesy.”

“So all’s well with the harvest at the kolkhoz?” Klyucharev asked in a loud voice. “Well, we’ll see for ourselves how you’re faring.”

“It’s all-put on,” Zhenya was thinking to herself with distaste. “He’s just playing the democrat.”

They drove to Bolshany and stopped outside a new log house with a terrace under a fret-work cornice. It

was the first time Zhenya had seen any wood-carving in Polesie and she would very much like to enquire who had brought the art to this village. But the foreman of the carpenters, an elderly man with a deep tan, proudly led Klyucharev into the empty house, flinging open the hollow-sounding doors and not paying the slightest attention to the young stranger.

There was a sharp smell of pine-wood. The floors, walls and ceilings, still to be painted and plastered, radiated sunny light.

"Now here's something that wasn't mentioned in the plan, Comrade secretary. What I thought was this: in rainy weather let the kids have a little verandah to play on. If you're going to build a house you might as well do it properly. This place is just right for you know what?"

"I know. For a hospital."

"That's right. I could build another one for the crèche, before the summer's out."

"Well, we can't have everything at once. There's a hospital quite near by, at Luchesy, but a crèche is something you need badly. The sooner it's ready the better: harvest time's not far off and the women'll start scutching the flax."

"Yes, it seems you're right," said the foreman, sighing.

"How are you off for grain at your place?" Klyucharev asked.

"Oh, I've never forgotten what you said, Comrade secretary. Last year it was. We've got to see to it, you said, that a collective farmer need never worry about where his bread's to come from. Well, those words have come true: we never give a thought to bread in Bolshany these days."

"But you need to be paid more money for your work-days."

"That's true."

"He's talking about the grain just to show he's got their interests at heart," thought Zhenya doggedly as she followed Klyucharev round the building.

They went into the kolkhoz offices. Two sturdy peasants were seated at a plank-topped table near the tight-shut windows, playing draughts to the accompaniment of a frantic buzzing of flies. Instead of draughtsmen the players were using the jagged-edged metal stoppers of beer bottles.

Klyucharev tossed them a casual greeting that was free of the false bonhomie affected by some chiefs, looked around the room, frowned and kicked aside the cigarette-ends that littered the floor near the table.

"Isn't Blishchuk about?"

"No, Comrade secretary."

"Having a game?"

"That's right."

"On duty?"

"Yes."

"Guarding the building? 'Fraid it'll run away? Well," Klyucharev said after a while, "let me have a game with you, since you've nothing else to do in these busy times."

The men sighed dubiously and set out the beer-bottle tops on the board.

"So the number of draughtsmen depends on how much beer the chairman drinks?"

"Oh no," the men said guiltily. "Most of these come off lemonade bottles."

They played with passionate absorption. From her seat at the end of the bench Zhenya found her eyes drawn to the board, following every move.

Klyucharev lost the first game. And though Blishchuk had now returned and was standing near, prompting

the players, Klyucharev set out the draughtsmen for a return game. This time he drew. Encouraged by Klyucharev's genial mood, Blishchuk said to him gaily:

"Oh, Maxim's no good. Have a game with me."

But Klyucharev was already on his feet and on his way to the next room, the chairman's office, where on the log walls besides framed testimonials under glass hung several magnificent sheaves of flax. The heavy tramp of the men's feet set the little bells in the flax heads trembling.

"Tell me, Blishchuk, how long are you going to play hide-and-seek with me?" Klyucharev said abruptly in a quiet even voice. "Half your farm is going to pot while you go on knocking up records with the other half." And without giving Blishchuk time to reply he went on, "How much money are you paying per work-day this year?"

"I think. . . ."

Blishchuk cautiously indicated Zhenya with his eyes: who was she, that stranger?

Zhenya turned away indifferently to the window and looked at a well with a long sweep and at the ash-grey sky above it.

"Bratichi has only two hundred and eighty households and they made eight hundred and forty thousand rubles all told—they're no millionaire kolkhoz but the collective farmers are getting more cash per working day than you're paying here."

"But we're paying in grain too. . . ."

"When did you hold your last general meeting?"

"Last May. Middle of the month."

"Did you discuss the results of the first half-year with the collective farmers?"

"No. The auditing committee. . . ."

"You've sold some cattle, haven't you?"

"Why, yes."

"Without the agreement of the general meeting?"

"Oh, that's the easiest thing in the world," said Blishchuk, perking up. Klyucharev's impetuous questions, his sharp tone, had put him out. He wanted to gain a breathing space and recover his usual self-assurance. "The easiest thing in the world," he repeated. "The meeting won't oppose. If I say, 'We'll sell a thousand head,' they'll all shout, 'Agreed.' "

A silence so ominous descended on the room that Zhenya turned involuntarily from the window. Blishchuk and Klyucharev sat glaring at each other across the shaggy flannel table-cloth.

And what an expression Klyucharev's face wore!

It was as if Zhenya saw him for the first time. His eyes were narrowed, sharp as daggers, but a variety of feelings passed, like a shadow of a cloud, over his frowning brow and the corners of his mouth. Vexation, anger, a strange pity, a sense of shame for the other man.... For a moment Zhenya thought he was going to come down like a ton of bricks on Blishchuk—that he would flush with anger, the way he had done when he shouted at the old watchman at the quarantine post.

But when he spoke his voice was quiet:

"I see, so the kolkhoz depends on you alone. Without you, Blishchuk, everything would go to pieces?"

There was a few moments' silence. Klyucharev looked absent-mindedly at Zhenya. She might not have been there for all the notice he took of her. His eyes saw beyond her, out of the window.

"How much peat have you lifted?"

"Nine thousand tons, up to date," Blishchuk replied, brightening up. "We've dug enough for the whole district."

Klyucharev rose heavily to his feet.

"Very well, let's go and look at it."

To Zhenya he made a vague gesture which meant: "Come along too. Your turn hasn't come yet, as you can see."

Zhenya hurried to the car.

The marsh was dark green, crossed by a deep ditch.

"We won't get through in the car," said Blishchuk in an anxious tone. "It'd get stuck."

"Never mind. If we can't drive we'll walk."

Klyucharev sprang over a ditch, his boots sinking to the ankles in the soft swampy earth. Then turning and noticing that Zhenya was about to follow him he said, with a view to her smart white sandals rather than their owner:

"Wait for us here."

Zhenya stopped obediently and watched Klyucharev walk on. The driver of the district committee car, a phlegmatic fellow called Sasha, got out of the car to stretch his legs on the grass. Taking a rareripe apple out of his pocket he started to munch it. Drops of white juice spurted from it.

It was now long after midday. Zhenya felt something buzzing in the air. Or was it her ears? She buried her face in her hands and shut her eyes for a moment; she felt a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach.

"D'you happen to have another apple?"

When they were both happily eating dark, sharply salted bread with sweet apples, Zhenya, who was now feeling better, said:

"I thought Bolshany was your best kolkhoz. That's what they told me at the regional centre."

Sasha shrugged vaguely.

"Yes, it's the best, of course."

"Then tell me," Zhenya went on confidentially, "why does he scold the chairman so?"

Sasha, narrowing his eyes a little, looked at the two figures standing up against the sky—as pale and faded

in the sunlight as an old photograph: Klyucharev with his tall green cap and khaki tunic, and Blishchuk, brisk and nimble in a black unbuttoned coat.

"Scold him!" Sasha drawled. "There's plenty more coming to him for his little tricks! Behaves like a baron. Sends his lorries to Glubin like taxis. One for himself, another for the bookkeeper, and the only load they take is a stack of flax, to get themselves a write-up in the newspapers."

Klyucharev and Blishchuk returned to the car silent and sour-faced. Taking a seat in the back of the car next to Zhenya, Blishchuk stole another cautious glance at her only to avert his eyes at once. His face wore an obstinate expression, his eyes were leaden and lustreless between the unblinking lids.

At the poultry farm to which Blishchuk plodded with obvious reluctance, glancing aside and slashing at the tops of the tall grass with a stick he had picked up, Zhenya saw a low-lying shed. In the chicken pen behind a fence sat a disabled man waving a sprig of leaves and chasing away a few dozen short-tailed chickens of mixed colours. The chickens were fiercely scratching at the dry soil which was lavishly strewn with chaff.

"We feed 'em on wheat and curds," Blishchuk could not resist boasting even here, and cast a brief glance at this "chicken farm." "Our ducks do better though."

Klyucharev looked at him with vexation and mockery in his eyes.

"What do they want wheat for? They need worms and mineral food. How far is it from here to Glubin? Nine kilometres? Why don't you get a cart-load of children out there? Put them to work gathering clam-shells. Then, if you keep the shells in steam for a few minutes they'll open; they make excellent feed. Even the pigs will take it. And here you are feeding your chickens on wheat and nothing else. How would you like to be

put in a cosy place and given nothing but honey to eat, eh?"

"I don't like honey," mumbled Blishchuk, looking away sullenly.

"Well, do you like bacon? How'd you like a diet of nothing but bacon?"

"We'll do something about the poultry. That we can manage. . . ."

"And what about your piggery? I'm ashamed to go and look at it. Look here, have you a lorry going in to Glubin tomorrow?"

"Yes, sure enough," said Blishchuk importantly. "We're turning in our flax."

"Well, make a detour and drop in at Bratichi. They're not millionaires but take a look at their pigs—you will learn something from them."

Blishchuk's eyes suddenly flashed.

"I won't go. I'll beat them yet," he said haughtily.

Over the smooth waters of Bolshany lake along with the acrid smoke of bonfires the breeze carried the unceasing sound of women scutching the flax on scutching-boards. The wavy surface of the water mirrored their figures, and their red blouses and white kerchiefs seemed to be floundering in the water.

The women turned and exchanged greetings with Klyucharev. Beads as red as rowan-berries sparkled at their sunburned throats mixing with drops of sweat.

"It's all right, Comrade secretary, we Bolshany folk are not afeared of hard work," one woman flung jauntily at him, tossing her head. "We're not the sort that goes into the fields asking what time the sun sets. We say, 'Oh, if only the day were longer!'"

"I wonder in what way this scene differs from prehistoric times?" said Klyucharev through his teeth. He

was a little out of breath from the steep climb (they had come up the bank to the bridge). "In the past they used to plant their land individually, now they do it as a kolkhoz. Is that all the difference? But if you go back to the times of primitive communism you'll find they had common ownership of the land then too. True, they didn't elect people like Blishchuk as their chairmen. . . . Well, why don't you buy a scutching mill?"

"Where from?"

"From the stores in Glubin."

"What kolkhozes have them?" asked Blishchuk, more rose to the verge of insolence.

"Soviet Way and Chapayev have got 'em. . . . Oh, you weren't born yesterday, Blishchuk. You know all that better than I do. You're simply wasting work-days. You think you can throw dust in people's eyes by giving them bonuses. The kolkhoz has outgrown you and now you're barring the way forward, though only yesterday you built it all with your own hands."

Klyucharev spoke sternly. There was something in his tone that made Blishchuk throw at him for the first time a startled look full of alarm.

"Comrade Vdovina will stay at your place for the time being," said Klyucharev as he opened the car door. Then, turning to Zhenya for a second, added, "I'll come back for you in a week if you feel like going somewhere deeper."

He did not offer his hand, merely nodded and, getting into the car, raised his cap. The rim had left a deep red line around his brow.

Must be a hard rim, thought Zhenya as she sorrowfully watched the cloud of dust settle behind the car. She turned reluctantly to Blishchuk—and hardly recognized him. The chairman seemed to have grown in height: so authoritative, so dignified and important all his gestures had become.

"Let us go to the office," he proposed. "Tell me what you have come here for. Maxim, bring the bag," he commanded without turning to look at the man.

Taking the chair that Klyucharev had occupied not long before Blishchuk sat at his desk and unhurriedly spread before him the sheet of paper containing Zhenya's "marching orders." The rubber stamp of the Academy of Sciences evidently made a certain impression on him.

The word "folklore" was new to him but he listened so understandingly to every word Zhenya said, his eyes shone with such genuine interest that the girl spoke to him in greater detail than she had intended.

"Aha, now I understand. I think you'll find something that'll interest you here in Bolshany."

He smiled indulgently at her look of surprise:

"Klyucharev runs the district, I'm in charge here. Every place has its own chief."

2

Pinchuk had long since given up wishing Klyucharev ill. In fact, he had even grown rather attached to him in his own way. In any case, he considered it better to tolerate Klyucharev's difficult temper and to work in one of the leading districts than to work with some easy-going, smooth-mannered Party secretary in a backward district.

"It's always best to choose the lesser of two evils," Pinchuk said to his wife Anna Vasilyevna as he climbed into their big double bed after a busy day's work. Above his head a silver pocket clock hung ticking from a nail in the wall; through the wardrobe door wafted a sickly smell of naphthalene. Anna was combing her long black hair for the night. For all her forty years it was still quite thick and soft.

"We don't live too badly," said Pinchuk, sighing and stretching with pleasure. "It's a great thing to stick to a straight path through life. We got through the war all right, thank God, and I've no personal reprimands against me. Remember how when they were looking for someone to send here in 'forty-five from the regional centre everybody tried to wriggle out of it and talked about how remote Glubin was and about the bandits roaming the forests? But I didn't refuse: they'd have sent me here anyhow, so why spoil your own reputation? How things will turn out in the future no one can tell but there's one thing in my record that's already chalked up in my favour: Maxim Pinchuk's not afraid of difficulties."

"All right, all right, my brave fellow," grumbled Anna, taking the pins out of her hair. "You got everything going here and then Klyucharev comes along. Who's going to remember you now? Klyucharev is getting all the plums from now on...."

"No, Anna, you're wrong if you think he came here when everything was running smoothly," said Pinchuk quietly. "Far from it."

Anna had touched Pinchuk's sorest spot. Why, oh why had all hearts in the district suddenly turned to Klyucharev, the way sunflowers turn to the sun? How had he managed to charm them all? After all, he hadn't Pinchuk's good nature, and hail-fellow-well-met approach to everyone; he stormed about the district, interfering in all sorts of unnecessary little things, cursing and deriding and thumping his fist (oh yes, that had happened too) but then he would sit down at the same table with his victims, disregarding all form. Where was the logic in it? Yet from year to year Klyucharev grew up like a tree while Pinchuk ... well, what did it matter? It wasn't so bad to be in Klyucharev's shadow.

"I'm not one that wants to be number one," he said

judiciously, suppressing the slight sense of mortification which, had he taken the pains to examine it carefully, would probably have given him the clue to the real difference between him and Klyucharev. For people sometimes come to the truth by different ways.

Anna, however, distracted her husband's thoughts by raising another, quite fascinating topic:

"I don't know what you think about it, Maxim, but I find these frequent trips of Raisa Stepanovna very suspicious," she said. "I know, her parents are old and ailing and they live in a beautiful place with lovely weather and the sea, which is good for the boy, but all the same, it seems to me that's just meant to pull wool over people's eyes. I asked Fyodor Adrianovich myself how he liked to live on his own for close on six months, and all he did was smile and say, 'I don't mind. I'm used to a soldier's life.' Used to it! Don't you think there's something behind it all?"

"N-no," replied Pinchuk thoughtfully. "Everything's all right there. They don't quarrel, he's not playing around with anybody else."

"Not quarrelling isn't everything," sighed Anna, examining her face in the hand mirror. Yes, she *was* putting on weight. "By the way, this is going to be a good year for tomatoes. We ought to lay down a barrelful for salting."

"Right, I'll ring up Kolesnichenko at the co-op tomorrow...." And Pinchuk's thoughts were now fully turned in another direction.

Next day, about dinner-time, the district vet, a short, plump man with a shrill voice named Perchik, burst into the office of the district executive committee.

"It's you I want to see, Maxim Petrovich," he shouted to Pinchuk the moment he entered the room. He pulled

out a handkerchief and mopped his pink perspiring face, as round as a child's balloon. "I tried to get at Klyucharev but he's not in and this is urgent. It's about Blishchuk again, whether you like it or not."

"Well, Blishchuk's no saint," said Pinchuk placatingly, noting for himself that the man had sought Klyucharev first. "Except for the fact that he's chairman of the best kolkhoz in the district and that he's had his picture on the cover of *Ogonyok* he's got no special merits that I know of."

Pinchuk liked to talk that way: half-serious, half-jocular. His hearers could understand him as they liked as long as he could gain time and not rush into a wrong decision! And Blishchuk really was a figure around whom things were getting a bit too complicated.

"Well, what is it this time?" he asked wearily.

"This time we all but came to blows and I don't care what reprimand you choose to give me for it." Perchik sprang from the edge of his chair and bounced from corner to corner of the office. "I have my own work to do, Maxim Petrovich, and I'm responsible for it. I'm interested in what the sows look like, not *Ogonyok*. What do I care for his records in other branches of production!"

"More to the point, Abram Lvovich," said Pinchuk, and again he found himself thinking, "Would he have kicked up a fuss like this with Klyucharev, I wonder? I suppose so, nobody could tame Perchik."

"Well, this is the point. He put one woman to look after two hundred pigs and sent the rest to work on the flax and pile up work-days. Just think of it! Such a show! And he sits there as drunk as a lord and wouldn't listen to a word I say—told me to get out. Well, I couldn't restrain my feelings, I went for him...." Perchik flourished out his short arms. "It was the only thing to be done"—he was shouting again now—"I don't believe in in-

dividual terror, God knows. I report to the proper authorities."

H'm, thought Pinchuk surprisingly, it'd have been better if Perchik had found Klyucharev in. Then, aloud, he said, reassuringly, "I'll phone Blishchuk. We'll sort it out."

Perchik opened his mouth to speak ("What is there to sort out? The case is as clear as crystal.") but nothing came out but a loud sigh; then out he bounced like a cat on hot bricks, and made off straight to Klyucharev's office to wait for the Party secretary's return.

Left alone, Pinchuk felt momentarily relieved at the thought that his was not the first voice in the district and that it wasn't up to him to straighten out the tangle. But feeling calmer about his own position he as usual began to worry about Klyucharev. Well, there was a man who didn't know how to arrange his life. Sometimes he bustles ahead where he's not wanted and turns up shortcomings where he could overlook them, and at other times he lags behind, hangs fire and exposes himself to criticism by the regional Party committee. Was that reasonable? A man ought to make up his mind and stick to it. If he'd decided to stand up for Blishchuk then he ought to put a stop to all the talk that was going on about the fellow. Klyucharev was the boss, he could do it if he wanted to; all that was needed was a sharp word at a meeting and people would understand there was plenty to do besides criticizing the best kolkhoz in the district. Had Klyucharev taken that line, Pinchuk would have understood, would have approved. As for Blishchuk, well, he could have been given a jogging behind closed doors: "What's going on, you old so-and-so, want to get yourself sacked?" That'd jolt him up all right, he was no fool. Well then, why did he have to wait and stand aside and let tongues

wag? At the last meeting of Party activists three notes had been handed up to the presidium: "How much longer is the district Committee going to put up with Blishchuk's disgraceful behaviour and high-handedness?" That about the chairman of the leading kolkhoz! Shocking! Klyucharev read the notes out loud and then gave the floor to a team-leader from Bolshany. Asked him what he had to say on the matter. The man refused to speak, said he wasn't prepared.... But he stood up for Blishchuk: it was true he drank, he said, but he never lost his head. And the kolkhoz was ahead of any other.

Why had Klyucharev not revealed his attitude to Blishchuk on that occasion? Was he sorry for him, or what? But it wasn't statesman-like to show pity. And although Pinchuk didn't find it very pleasant to recall the occasion he made an effort and said to himself, "Didn't I oppose Klyucharev when it seemed to me he was making a mistake?"

That unpleasant worrying day finished for Pinchuk with a phone call from the regional Party committee:

"D'you know, one of the rank-and-file collective farmers has written to the Central Committee about your Flax King. Seems she criticized him and then he refused her a horse for her needs and assaulted her. What do you intend to do about it?"

The quarrel between Blishchuk and the saucy widow Klanka Chizh had long been public knowledge in Glubin. There were folk who went as far as to say that it had broken out after the collapse of more tender relations....

But a letter to the Central Committee—that was not idle tittle-tattle.

"Damn the woman!" Pinchuk muttered, feeling thoroughly upset. "As if I hadn't enough on my shoulders without her!"

Klyucharev called for Zhenya much earlier than he had promised. Three days after he had left her at Bolshany she heard the familiar toot of his car outside the school building where all was quiet and empty except the teachers' room. She ran out to meet him.

"Hallo, hallo," she called, the first to offer a hand. It was smeared with water-colours. "What a good thing it is you've come, otherwise Vasily would have had to go to see you in Glubin...."

"Who did you say?"

"Oh, the new school master, Vasily Yemelyanovich Moroz."

Klyucharev at once recollected that a few days before the chief of the district educational department had brought into his office two young men with teachers' certificates from Minsk University (he liked to have a look at every newcomer).

One of them had behaved independently, a little brusquely even, as if he were weighing up Klyucharev himself: was he worthy of his, Kostya Sosnin's, confidence?

Sosnin had replied to all Klyucharev's questions with exaggerated politeness, jerking his shoulders defiantly now and again. Well, don't you like me? he seemed to be saying. As if I cared!

Klyucharev, only just keeping back a smile, had asked suddenly:

"What if we put you in charge of a village school? I suppose you're quite sure you could cope with the work."

"It doesn't matter much whether I'm sure or not," Sosnin had replied, the challenging note in his voice belied by the colour that mounted to his boyish cheeks. "If I fail you'll sack me, that's all there is to it."

"Of course I will," Klyucharev had assured him cheerfully and, considering that they'd made a deal, turned to the other young man. "And where would you like to go, Comrade Moroz?"

"I've a favour to ask," replied Moroz a little hesitantly. "Could you send us to the same place?"

"That's something I can't do," Klyucharev had said seriously. "We can't afford the luxury of sending two men with your education to one school. Not yet."

"What's worrying the school master here?" Klyucharev now asked Zhenya.

"The school isn't ready to open, that's what's wrong," Zhenya replied tartly and drew Klyucharev lightly behind her up the steps of the porch. "There's no visual aids," she ticked off the items with her fingers, "the only maps that've come are physical. At history lessons the frontiers of the principalities have to be marked in pencil: yellow for the seventeenth century, blue for the eighteenth. Why, with a map like that I'd get bad marks myself."

On the long table in the teachers' room sheets of cartridge-paper were spread. A young teacher (Klyucharev did not remember her name) got up as he entered the room and in her confusion forgot to put down her brush.

"Alliteration," Klyucharev read in big wet letters, and below it, in smaller letters, "Near the Black Sea broom bushes are in blossom."

He glanced at Zhenya who was watching him out of a corner of an eye, in eager expectation.

"Was this your idea? Very bright."

He walked round the room, attentively reading several other little posters drying on the floor: "Ballad," "Rhythm," "Rhyme."

"They're easier to remember if you give examples," the young teacher said with a didactic air.

Klyucharev nodded.

"Near the Black Sea broom bushes are in blossom," he repeated under his breath. "But, you know, I've come for you," he said, tossing his head and turning back to Zhenya. "We have a kolkhoz called Soviet Way in the village of Dvortsy. It's probably the remotest place in the district. You're looking for the exotic, aren't you? Thatched roofs, bast shoes, people sleeping on stove shelves. . . ."

"I'm not looking for them," retorted Zhenya, annoyed. "I need them for my work."

"See how different our work is, yours and mine. You need to find bast shoes and I want to get rid of them."

Klyucharev was in a good mood that day.

"Oh, I forgot. I've a letter for you."

He handed Zhenya a blue envelope addressed care of the district Party committee. The colour rushed to Zhenya's cheeks as she impatiently tore open the envelope.

"Dear Zhenya, I am writing this first of all to repeat a thousand times what I said at the station. . . ."

... A stiff hot breeze blew through the open window of the car. It was a breeze saturated with the damp odour of grass and with the running shadows of the clouds. The borders of the road were thickly freckled with yellow dandelions. Klyucharev could see a part of Zhenya's face reflected in the driving mirror over the wind-screen. He watched her lips move trustfully as they formed inaudibly the words of the letter. Well, each age knows its own happiness. At twenty, happiness seemed absolute and undying as it does to a little shoot of grass in April. But when a man has passed thirty it is like the end of a sultry stormy summer. . . .

When Klyucharev was certain that the girl had learned the letter by heart he asked:

"How did you like Bolshany?"

"I didn't like it at all," replied Zhenya, returning to

reality with a sigh. "If everyone round here is like your Blishchuk . . ."

"Well, well, go on," said Klyucharev, his interest roused.

With angry eyes Zhenya told him that when Blishchuk had learned that she was interested in folklore he had prepared a "surprise" for her. On the day after her arrival a group of girls had walked past her window. Laughing and nudging each other, they sang, none too loudly, couplets about their marvellous kolkhoz and its chairman. Zhenya had spoken to them casually about this and that and then asked:

"How long have you been singing those couplets?"

"Oh, not long. Yesterday Blishchuk sent for the librarian and said he wanted a song about our kolkhoz. We looked through the songbook and made up some new verses."

"D'you get all your couplets from the songbook?"

"Not all of them. Some come to us like the wind, like tears from the eyes."

"H'm, so that's how he arranges folk art," muttered Klyucharev glumly and sank into a long silence.

The road narrowed and ran twisting and turning into the forest. Aspen and maple trees and oaks were interspersed with pines on the hummocky earth of the forest. The mighty crowns of the roadside willows shut out half the sky.

When they reached Dvortsy the day was fading. Dust hung lazily in the air, raised by the herd that had returned from the pasture, the smell of warm milk came from every cottage yard. The air seemed to have congealed and along the narrow village street the two rows of cottages seemed to have moved even closer to each other than usual: you could span the street, it appeared, with a single plank placed from one wattle fence to another.

The silence was extraordinary. And perhaps because the forest closed in on the place so densely and the cottages under their brown thatch stood crooked and dark with age and the women went about in old-fashioned embroidered vests and bright cotton skirts and kerchiefs worn low across their brows, or because at this late hour there were few children about to rush after the car with yelps of joy, to Zhenya this little village looked like a real corner of old Polesie, where life flowed calmly and timorously, sheltered from the rest of the world by marshes and forest.

Chairman Valyushitsky came back from the fields when the twilight was so deep that Zhenya could not distinguish his features. All she saw was a crimson shirt glaring hotly from under his open tunic, as though the man had brought in from the fields with him the last gleam of the setting sun. Valyushitsky greeted his visitors without appearing to be much surprised at seeing Klyucharev at this late hour. They strolled through the village.

On the cottage roofs sleepy storks clattered their mandibles irascibly. On some roofs there were two nests.

"See that nest?" said Valyushitsky, looking up. "The male bird must have been hurt or got lost somehow and the hen's pushed one of her chicks out of the nest; she can't manage to feed 'em all."

"Really?" Klyucharev stopped and stared up at the white shadow. Then he shook his head as if unable to find the right word to comment on the bird's cruel logic.

As they walked they met a few villagers. The men raised their caps, and their faces were briefly illuminated in the glow of their cigarettes. The women passed with the gleam of a modest white blouse and a word or two of greeting, spoken in a gentle singsong. The cottage windows were still dark. Suddenly there was a strong

sharp scent of freshly cut wood in the soft air. A club house was in process of construction here, almost complete, and in the dusk they could make out its walls of unpainted logs. Squeezed among the dark cottages it looked small but cosy, almost as though it were already in use.

"You ought to have a dance floor outside," said Klyucharev. "Not in the plan, you say? Doesn't matter, alter the plan. You're building it yourselves, aren't you? With your own labour."

Klyucharev seemed to sense that this club was going to become the very heart of Dvortsy, the favourite place of the villagers, somewhere to gather in the evenings after work for a smoke with the neighbours, the way people were already doing on the log pile.

Klyucharev and the chairman stopped and greeted the people. Zhenya sat with them. She loved that strong scent of the new building timber that hung about the place.

They talked about the crops, about the moon coming up with a misty ring around it and whether it meant bad weather right in the middle of the harvest season.

"A peasant can't live without hope," a voice rang in unhurried measure. "It's not like in a factory where you've got a roof over your head. Whatever it is—rain or hail or drought—you'll do your bit. Here we have to know how to hurry and how to wait and how to put all our strength into the job at once. But the main thing is to go on hoping, not to give up."

People spoke in low voices as if they were anxious not to disturb the silence around them.

"What are you planning for next year?" Klyucharev asked a little later, pensively, as though slightly opening a door to his dreams.

Valyushitsky heaved a gusty sigh in the darkness, and Zhenya felt that just then his thoughts were already

in that year to come which would follow the harvest and the threshing, the autumn rains and the first snows of winter.

“What we need more than anything else here in Dvortsy is light, Fyodor Adrianovich,” he said shyly. “We can’t do without electricity these days. Every cottage ought to have light and a radio. Willy-nilly, we’ve got to buy a diesel.”

His voice resounded with so winning a note of satisfaction that he, a man of Polesie, was going to introduce electricity into his native village with his own hands—and at the same time the tight-fisted manager in him caught his breath involuntarily at the thought of the impending expense—that Zhenya suddenly felt like bursting out laughing from some inner joy. Greetings to you, new Dvortsy, she wanted to cry, drawing herself upright to address that street, for all the darkness in which it lay folded yet.

“Tell me, Fyodor Adrianovich,” she said on the way back, “why did we come here?”

Klyucharev’s face lay in deep shadow; only his eyes were visible, glistening through lowered lashes.

“You came here to see the old Polesie. I—”
He warmed up to the subject. “What d’you think? Are you surprised I didn’t call a meeting and preach a sermon? A district Party secretary, by the way, does not exist merely to issue instructions. I came simply as a friend, if you want to know. I’m really fond of Semyon, as a matter of fact.”

“Who?”

“Valyushitsky, the chairman.”

“Fyodor Adrianovich,” Zhenya said with a sudden burst of recklessness. “Would you like me to tell you how I came to know Kurilo?”

“What did you say?” Klyucharev asked in surprise, and added simply, “Well, let’s hear it....”

Zhenya's father, a mining engineer, was going away for a long, very long time.

"By the time I get back, daughter, you'll probably be preparing for your doctor's degree," he had written, half-jokingly, half-sadly. Her father's busy life always seemed to run along different lines than Zhenya's. She did not particularly miss his tenderness; her mother could make up for that. And she had plenty of friends to talk to; when she met her father at the dinner-table or on a holiday he would just pat her on the cheek.

"Well, how are things with you, little fidget?" he would ask her with a sigh, and not know what to add. He could not keep track of her interests. She seemed to be growing out of them as fast as out of her frocks. In his heart he always imagined her as the little child he remembered under a pink flannel blanket.

When she received the letter telling her of her father's long trip Zhenya suddenly missed him very much. For some reason she remembered all at once the wrinkles in his face and his greying temples, and she felt alarmed: what a lot of things had remained unsaid between them, how little he knew his Zhenya!

Before her lay a month of study and exams. But she made arrangements to take the exams earlier so that she would have three weeks' holidays, the same three weeks that her father had planned to spend on the Volga with his elder sister.

Zhenya had never studied so hard in her life.

With her exam report in her pocket she hurried straight to the river port. But there people only laughed at her naïveté: there was a long waiting-list for tickets—if she left her name she might get one in three weeks' time.

"But this is an absolutely exceptional case," she said in despair. "There's no sense at all in my going there in three weeks' time."

A shrug was the only reply she got.
Then, restraining her indignation, she asked:
"Very well, but there are some people who can get tickets without waiting, aren't there?"
"Heroes of the Soviet Union and deputies of the Supreme Soviet," she was told.

Zhenya did not number either Heroes of the Soviet Union or deputies among her acquaintances. She wandered aimlessly through the streets, staring wistfully at anyone she met who wore a gold star on his chest. Finally, she took the plunge. What else could she do?

"Comrade Hero of the Soviet Union," she said in a solemn faltering voice, addressing a man wearing a Gold Star, who happened to be standing next to her in a bus queue.

"Yes," replied the man, lowering the newspaper he had been glancing through. "What can I do for you?"

"You can do me a good turn. It'll only take an hour of your time."

The man hardly had time to raise his eyebrows before the trolleybus came up rustling with its tyres.

"I'll tell you everything inside," Zhenya said plaintively, jumping into the bus.

In the overcrowded bus she gave him a confused account of her predicament. The man's stony expression alarmed her. She found herself mumbling: "Of course, I realize . . . you must be terribly busy. . . ." But at that moment the man, as stern as ever, asked:

"When does the booking-office open? You must realize that I'm just passing through Moscow. I'm leaving the day after tomorrow."

It turned out to be far from easy for even a Hero of the Soviet Union to secure a steamer ticket at the height of the summer season. Twice they met at nine in the morning near the booking-office and it was only on the third day that he handed her the pretty blue-edged ticket

of the Volga Navigation Company. There was nothing more for Zhenya to do but thank her Hero and say good-bye, especially as he was going back to Byelorussia. As Zhenya walked her steps grew slower and slower. Was it really going to end like that? Were they going to part like two strangers?

"Well, what are you going to do?" her companion mumbled, shaking his grizzled curly head. There was a new warmth in his voice.

"When? Today?" she replied obtusely.

"Today and tomorrow," he said with a smile. "In life generally, I mean."

"So that's how I got to know Kurilo and not at all because he is the regional chief," Zhenya concluded, trying to fathom what sort of impression her story had made on Klyucharev, sitting beside her in the darkness.

"H'm." Klyucharev sounded satisfied.

They drove on and on, bumping over the road cut through the forest, which lay ahead of them in the steady beam of the head-lamps.

"What is courage, Fyodor Adrianovich?" asked Zhenya a little later.

The question surprised Klyucharev. He reflected before replying.

"I think courage is defending with all one's strength something you believe in."

"I see." Zhenya fixed his words in her memory by repeating them inaudibly to herself. "And happiness?"

Her young searching glance bored his face relentlessly. Klyucharev smiled and shrugged slightly.

At night, in the light of the headlights, the road looked quite different. The oat fields were bathed in a soft milky-white light as gentle and mysterious as the light of bottle-glass. A tree, torn from the darkness, looked as if it were being illumined suddenly by a flash of lightning, so distinctly was every leaf with all its veins re-

vealed, so clearly was seen every wrinkle on the bark of the trunk. A second later the tree had disappeared, drowned in the night. Sometimes the car stopped and its passengers got out, and then they too were swallowed up in the impenetrable darkness. They groped for the flowering buckwheat growing beside the road and buried their faces in its bedewed fluffy floscules with ineffable pleasure, and released them without picking any. The buckwheat fields, clothed in mist, stretched in a vague white sheet as far as the eye could see.

"There's no better work than a collective farmer's," Klyucharev said abruptly, inhaling deeply of the fresh, herb-scented air.

"Why's that?"

"It's happy work. Gives full and immediate satisfaction. You cast seed on the earth and it grows under your eyes. You gather the crop, knowing it's not only for you but for all."

The earth breathed silence and peace. An amazing night! Everything that is good in man seems to awake at such moments and to be listening intently, taking in deep breaths.

"Stop!"

The car stopped again. At the left of the road stood a dark shape like a huge sleeping bird with folded wings.

"A combiné. How could they leave it here with no one to keep an eye on it? Hey, is anyone there?"

There were a few seconds of dead silence. A single reddish star hung low on the horizon. And to Zhenya it seemed that besides that star and the combine and the two of them on the road nothing else existed in the whole world.

"Who's that?" a voice replied at last. It belonged to a man in a rough jacket covered with straw who crawled out of the heart of the machine. "I thought it was the inspector."

CHAPTER FOUR

TALK ABOUT WEDDINGS

1

On the green which forms the town square at Glubin stands a solitary platform made of well-worn red-painted planks, and a tall flag-pole bearing a silver star which looks as if it would be doing better service on a Christmas-tree. Here it is that on national holidays the people gather for meetings. To the strains of a brass band a red flag is hoisted and if it is May Day or November the 7th small processions pass the platform, consisting of the pupils from Glubin's two schools, the staff of the district departments and peasants from nearby villages.

Beyond the tribune rise the cupolas of a little church with a tarnished tin-plated roof. From here three bells ring thoughtfully and melodiously several times a day.

"Kandyba's ringing," people would say in the district executive committee offices and go off for lunch.

Father Kandyba was a figure of some standing in the district. He was in his late sixties and he lived in a house adjoining the church. On his rare appearances in the streets he was always to be seen in a faded cassock and a wide-brimmed straw hat. Walking one day along the narrow pavement Klyucharev found himself face to face with the priest.

"Citizen secretary," the priest said. His manner was somewhat solemn though he was hoarse with excitement. "I ask you to give me a few minutes of your time on a matter of some urgency."

"Wouldn't it perhaps be better if you came to see me in my office?" said the embarrassed Klyucharev, and at once realized the absurdity of his words.

"That would hardly be suitable," the priest answered meekly. "But the matter I have to convey to you will certainly interest you as the person in charge of these parts."

Trying to overcome a feeling of awkwardness that sprang from the rather comic attitude to the very word "priest" shared by the generation that had grown up since the Revolution, Klyucharev looked at the old man with curiosity. He noted that the eyes under the grizzled brows though dimmed with age were far from dull and that they met his own without disquiet; the priest's withered fingers played nervously with a button under the cassock.

"Very well," Klyucharev said, "what is it you wish to tell me?"

They drew aside to a place where they were less exposed to the eyes of passers-by, and Father Kandyba told Klyucharev that in the villages of Bolshany and Luchesy there had recently been a revival in the activities of the Stundists, members of a heretical sect. From reliable sources the priest had heard that Presbyter Stepan Lisyansky had strictly forbidden his flock to attend performances and meetings and, moreover, was trying to persuade parents not to let their children attend school after the fifth form.

"It is unlikely that you will find in those villages people willing to obtain technical education at the tractor-drivers' courses which, I have heard, are going to be set up in the regional town," said the priest cautiously and lowered his eyes.

H'm, the old chap was pretty well informed, Klyucharev thought to himself—the circular letter about the courses had only reached him the day before. He looked at the priest more attentively. Father Kandyba's grey beard conveyed a feeling of frost even in the bright light of a hot July day; it reminded Klyucharev of the eternal

snows that he had seen resisting the heat of the sun on the Caucasian peaks.

Father Kandyba had long since thrown off his initial nervousness. His voice though quiet was full of dignity, the voice of a man accustomed to being listened to.

In the early stages of the conversation Klyucharev had been thinking of the fun he was going to have in telling his comrades how things were going so badly for the priest that the sectarians were getting uppish and the old buffer had had to come and complain about them to the district Party committee; but the closer he watched this wizened old man whose eyes were so firm and sharp under his drooping lids, the warier he became. Now it no longer struck him as a joke that those waxen hands calmly folded on the priest's belly were capable not only of holding a trembling stalk-thin candle with quivering yellow flame but also of authoritatively directing a human soul on the path he wanted him to take. And he recalled Stepan Lisyansky, a sturdy morose peasant more like a Moldavian than a Byelorussian in appearance, a man of whom Blishchuk had said with a vague smile: "Stundists? Yes, we have 'em. At least they work well and don't bother the kolkhoz."

However, the fact that Father Kandyba was seeking help against Lisyansky meant that the Stundists were undoubtedly a force, though a hidden one. And that also made him think.

"I know about the Stundists," said Klyucharev guardedly, and fell silent as if waiting for the priest to add something. The latter detected coldness in his tone, raised his head with a sudden jerk and looked Klyucharev straight in the eyes. The upper part of his face lay in the deep shadow cast by his hat brim but Klyucharev was again struck by the old man's keen intelligent gaze.

"I am speaking to you not only because you are a responsible official," Father Kandyba said quietly, "but

because I voted for you as my deputy." His face suddenly creased in a weak old man's smile.

Klyucharev, thrown somewhat off balance by the sudden turn in the conversation, almost exclaimed aloud, "Oh, the artful old dodger!"

For some time the passers-by had been casting inquisitive glances at the two men, but they went on talking.

"You honour and respect your warriors, and that is good," said the priest thoughtfully. "But I would like to remind you that in these parts there was also a bishop called Panteleimon who was imprisoned by the foreign intruders for preaching the Russian faith. You and I belong to different epochs, citizen secretary, we have different beliefs, but we are children of the same motherland," he said simply and raised a parched hand to the rim of his hat. "I wish you good health."

His dusty cassock, a black spot flashing along the sunny street, was out of sight before Klyucharev emerged from a rather strange reverie.

Disconnected ideas which had come into his head at various times were now falling into place. He recollect ed the vexation he had felt when the villagers of Dvortsy celebrated much too assiduously their local saint's day and the fact that he had not wanted to bring up the old story when he had last met Valyushitsky, although he remembered every detail of that wretched day. He remembered other occasions for dissatisfaction, things that were pushed in the background and forgotten under the press of work but which now he saw string out, as it were, on a single thread.

Klyucharev was not a man to indulge in solitary meditation: decisions, even the boldest, which others took in the silence of their offices came to him quite easily when he was in company, during a busy, heavily burdened working day. However physically tired he felt his mind never lost its alertness. He was always conscious

of that responsibility for the multitude of human lives which had been placed on him by the Party, and it was this that prevented his energy from flagging.

His talk with Father Kandyba left him feeling as if his face had been brushed by the wing of a bat, that silent and puzzling creature of the twilight. For a moment or two he *had* felt under the spell of that quiet voice, of those terse gentle gestures.

As though awakening he drew his hand across his forehead, and looked with a new interest at the blue church with its dull tin-plated onion-shaped cupolas. It stood straight before his eyes, a plain building constructed in a Russian church style with centuries of tradition behind it, a style which had not been led astray either by mysticism or cold asceticism and which above all spoke of a well-ordered life here on earth. The steep-gabled austere Pskov churches which Klyucharev had once seen in prints at Lobko's always reminded him of the log-built houses of the north. No wonder people called the cupolas onions, for they belonged to the familiar well-loved world and it was only ill-will that had made them do harm to man.

Klyucharev's eyes moved involuntarily over the whole structure from belfry to church porch, and for a moment he was sorry for those anonymous, long dead and buried masters who in century after century of work had found these fine proportions and put all their soul into giving them shape.

For a time, he found himself thinking—for a certain period after the war, in particular—many people had begun to confuse the attitude of the state and the Party towards religion. He himself had seen in many cottages icons adorned with embroidered towels and set off with paper roses. And usually, hanging beside them would be pictures of state and Party leaders and fancy posters bearing words like "Long Live May Day" or

"All out for the Supreme Soviet Elections." He had regarded all such things with indifference as mere wall decorations and perhaps in his mind too he had played down somewhat the ominous warning in Marx's words: "Religion is the opium of the people."

Deep in his thoughts Klyucharev walked slowly along the pavement. Suddenly the bell started ringing. Automatically he glanced at his wrist-watch, then frowned in vexation: there's force of habit for you! Why should people check their watches by the church bell and not, say, by a town clock? If it wasn't yet possible to hang up an electric clock, like they had in big towns, then why shouldn't the man on duty at the fire station strike the hours punctually according to the Moscow time signal? And not on some rusty, cracked bell either but with a clear, silvery sound....

"Did I see you talking to Kandyba, Fyodor Adriano-vich?" Pinchuk called. The chairman of the district executive committee was leaning over the window-sill of his office, his face wreathed in a familiar placid smile. "Maybe you'll drop in for a moment? It's a hot day and I've got a bottle of home-made kvass here."

"Kvass? Not something stronger?" joked Klyucharev absent-mindedly, well knowing that Pinchuk would at once remark that he wasn't allowed to drink. And so he did.

"No, I don't drink," Pinchuk said, and his prominent pale eyes assumed a melancholy expression. "Neither my health nor my wife allows me to."

"Oh, stop that!" said Klyucharev, restraining a sudden surge of irritation. "You'll outlive us all."

Pinchuk uttered a vague, shallow laugh.

"D'you know, I've never met Kandyba, though we're close neighbours. I wonder what you found to talk about for so long?"

"We'll have a talk about Kandyba at the proper time, and maybe it'll be more serious than you think. Now

tell me this: can you see the town garden out of your office window?"

Pinchuk shrugged in bewilderment: he could never adjust himself to this fellow. The devil alone knew what would come into Klyucharev's head. Of course he could see the garden with its dozen stunted trees behind a wooden palisade. They were right outside the windows. Why did the fellow have to ask?

Pinchuk said nothing. He was offended.

"And you will see the churchyard too," Klyucharev went on. "Lean out a bit farther, please. Doesn't it seem to you rather strange, rather shocking, in fact, that in Kandyba's churchyard the paths are tidy and there's grass growing everywhere—look, green, silky grass, like a girl's hair, why, it makes you feel you'd like to stroke it? Now look at our garden. Grass growing wild and yellow. Why, one would think, the very sun and the clouds were different over there. D'you think anyone ever feels like going into our garden? And if so, then why did we lay it out? Just to look nice on paper, eh? So we can say that Glubin has public baths, a tea-house, a town garden and . . . a chairman of the district executive committee? Everything complete."

Klyucharev kept his voice low. His voice, always rather muffled as a result of the concussion he got at the front, became still more indistinct in moments of excitement; he struggled for words, but the contracted pupils of his eyes bored through his interlocutor relentlessly.

"You want to have everything at once," said Pinchuk, shifting uncomfortably. Then he went on in a conciliatory manner, "Of course, we can raise the matter on the district executive and adopt a resolution . . ."

"Yes, I want to do everything at once," Klyucharev continued with passionate intensity, ignoring Pinchuk's last words. "There's a saying Snejhko brought back

from the front: When we're gone we won't be no more. And just because of that I want to do everything I can with my own hands, straight away."

He stopped abruptly, drew in breath and looked hard and searchingly into his companion's eyes. The smile had faded from Pinchuk's face, his lips were closed in a withdrawn and rather haughty expression. Now he looked older than his forty-five years. Perhaps it was the ten years' difference in their ages that made him feel suddenly calm somehow as he returned Klyucharev's look from the eminence of his window.

"Oh, he's a greenhorn," he was thinking to himself patronizingly. "You must have a rotten time, Fyodor Adrianovich, with that character of yours."

"Well," said Klyucharev in an altogether different tone, averting his eyes. "My advice is to raise the question as soon as possible and come to some decision about it. At the next bureau meeting we'll have a report from you on general amenities. Not only in the town but throughout the district." He ended on a harsh note and walked off.

"Why, that's fine. You can always count on me for a report," Pinchuk called after him loudly, and sank into his chair.

What was the matter with the fellow? Why, you might think he'd been bitten by a mad dog! There was hay-making in the kolkhozes and the harvest just beginning, and there he was talking about general amenities.

Pinchuk shook his head in perplexity. Then he poured some tepid home-made kvass into a glass and, stirring it against the light, sipped it slowly.

Through the window came the muffled sounds of a tambourine and then the music of an accordion growing shriller and shriller as a wedding party from some village approached. The church bell began to ring, as though beating out the measure for the music. Pinchuk

leaned halfway out of the window, trying to see the bride who was riding in the first cart, well wrapped up in muslin. He clicked his tongue and said in a loud, good-natured voice:

"Well, well, look at that! We *are* going to have a grand affair today."

A fair number of people had gathered under the window. At the chairman's words they turned and laughed approvingly.

"We could do with another go at it, Comrade chairman," a merry-faced old man cried boldly, stamping his feet. "An old horse doesn't spoil the furrows."

Pinchuk replied with a salty joke and turned back with satisfaction to his desk. "It's all far simpler, Comrade Klyucharev," his thoughts ran on. "You've got to take a simple view of people and of life itself. True enough, when we're gone we certainly won't be no more, you silly fellow."

Even now, when he was alone, Pinchuk went on smiling in his usual placid way, and as his thoughts were in playful vein he began to see Klyucharev's words in a quite different light.

So Klyucharev wanted a garden, did he? Well, he probably wouldn't be against taking a stroll himself, the grass widower that he was. What was it he said about liking to stroke a girl's hair? Perhaps there was something behind the remark.... Hadn't someone told him that Klyucharev had spent the night at Luchesy after attending the meeting of the kolkhoz board there? That was where Antonina Andreyevna worked in the village hospital.... True, he'd never noticed anything fishy before, Antonina Andreyevna was a proud girl and she'd never seemed to like Klyucharev much. But you never could tell with women.

Pinchuk's spirits were now fully restored. Without the slightest shadow of annoyance he busied himself

with the drawers of his desk. In the oppressive heat of a July noon he felt particularly comfortable in his office with its windows well-shaded by a leafy acacia. Everything there was so familiar and homely: the desk, broad as a flour bin; the strip of carpet stretching right across the room from the door as if to remind everyone who stepped into the office that this was no place for shouting or raising a fuss; the solid old clock by the wall.... On all this lay a stamp of stability, of immutability....

2

The wedding party overtook Klyucharev in the street which looked pale in the glare of the sun. Big round flowers stuck burr-like to the horses' manes. The bride and bridegroom rode side by side in the leading cart. The bride, a young girl, was clutching to her breast a bouquet wrapped in muslin; the bridegroom, a tall, good-looking young man, his cheeks flushed from vodka, wore a new suit with a little bunch of flowers sticking out of his breast pocket. He swayed in time to the cart's lurches over ruts and pot-holes and met the curious glances of the passers-by with a manly stoicism.

Among the matchmakers and relatives in the second cart a woman of somewhat withered looks—though she could not have been much over thirty—was holding stiffly before her a big yellow candle. In the next cart, their legs hanging over the edges of the cart, were the musicians: an accordionist and a young fellow who was beating a monotonous rhythm on a tambourine, maintaining a look of bland indifference on his round, ruddy-cheeked, sleepy little boy's face.

Klyucharev watched the procession with unsmiling eyes. Somehow those three carts evoked in him not a

single thought of youth, of shy beauty, of love, of all those things that the mind associates with the word "wedding." Perhaps it was the fault of the tipsy self-assurance of the bridegroom or the pitifully strained look of the woman with the candle that made him suddenly feel sorry for the bride: surely that same way, a century ago, even two centuries ago, bells a-ringing, a woman would be taken to work in her husband's house, to rise from her marriage-bed after a drunken wedding night and carry buckets submissively from the well and pots of feed to the cattle, feeling the sting of the morning frost on her bare legs.

"What am I thinking of?" Klyucharev pulled himself up hastily and not without a certain twinge of alarm. "Isn't everything changed now? There are laws, after all...." But again he checked his thoughts, knitting his brows as relentlessly as though he were looking in the eyes of a mortal enemy. No, it was not for him, a Communist, a coeval of October itself, to deceive himself. Kandyba was still flourishing in Glubin today. The insinuating peal of his bells had lost its power to order people but it could still entice and charm them, drag them back, cling to their legs with the tenacity of bog grass—yes, old Kandyba could still do that.

Klyucharev could not forgive himself for the blind indifference with which he had looked at that blue-walled church for so long. He suddenly recollected how once when driving to Bolshany out of Glubin he had overtaken two women in bright holiday skirts and in spangled Polesie bodices. Feeling that it would be a pity if their white aprons were soiled by the dust thrown up by the car he had stopped and offered them a lift to the village.

The women smiled shyly, flung their bundles to the floor of the car and got in. It took the younger of the two, Serafima, a fair-haired, blue-eyed girl with a flash-

ing smile, less than five minutes to shake off her shyness and to start bouncing childishly on the soft seat.

"So Aunt Dasha and I are having a ride in a Pobeda car!" she said boldly, sharing her smile between Klyucharev, the driver Sasha and the wrinkled-barked willows at the roadside. "Oh, doesn't it run nicely! If I knew when you were coming our way the next time, Comrade secretary, I'd be out on the road waiting for you on purpose." And when the car bumped over potholes making Klyucharev's teeth chatter she only smiled gaily as though she had made up her mind to enjoy whatever happened.

"When you get married, Serafima, I'll come and take you and your bridegroom for a nice drive," said Klyucharev, turning round. "You can count on me coming unless you have a church wedding."

"What should I go to church for?" the girl replied pertly; but then she smiled slyly and rather plaintively. "But a church wedding's awfully pretty, Comrade secretary. And I have a lovely veil ready...."

For some reason Klyucharev had not asked her whether she belonged to the Komsomol or, if not, why she hadn't joined it. He must have felt then that the questions would have sounded as a harsh reminder and that he needed different words to convince this girl.

Klyucharev glanced at his watch and strode on with an air of decision. But instead of crossing the square towards his office he went farther down the street. He could still hear the tinny ring of the tambourine.

Timber houses with ochre and blue shutters lined the street to the very edge of Glubin where just beyond the last house started the first field of spring wheat of the Liberation kolkhoz.

Klyucharev climbed the creaking steps of the porch of one of those houses and went indoors. In the first room he was met by a smell of an office mixed with the scent

of fading flowers: in a glass jam jar containing green stale water stood a tight bunch of camomiles, tall meadow grass, bluebells, clover, savory and lemon-hued buttercups.

The desk at which a girl, the instructor at the district Komsomol committee, usually sat, was now empty. The whole house was quiet and deserted though some damp patches on the floor and a smell of unsettled dust indicated that someone had been sweeping the place out recently and sprinkling water in a rather inexpert manner.

"All on your own, Pavel?" asked Klyucharev, flinging open another door. A shy cumbrously built young man with a head of black curly hair rose and came forward to meet him. His fingers were ink-stained, the desk behind him was covered with crumpled sheets of paper.

"Fyodor Adrianovich!" he said in a disturbed whisper. "Why didn't you ring me up? I'd have come myself...."

"Oh, it's nothing special. I was simply passing and thought I'd look in and see how you were getting on. I didn't even think I'd find you in."

"I got back only yesterday. I was over at Bratichi. There was a lorry going to Dvortsy today so I sent all the other three there: if only one goes there it'll take him a week to visit all their farmsteads. Anyway I have to sit here and write a report and do the statistics."

"What statistics?" Klyucharev sat down on an unpainted stool and looked around the walls. They had not been whitewashed for a long time; on them hung a number of faded diagrams—black columns of figures. "What are they all about?"

"Them?" Pavel followed Klyucharev's glance. He might have been noticing the diagrams for the first time in his life. "I don't really know. There's a legend on them if you want...."

Klyucharev laughed. He had a smile that was quite unexpected. When his lips parted, revealing a crooked

front tooth, his whole face seemed to light up with a mischievous boyish expression.

"Well, who on earth does read them if you haven't got round to reading them yourself? Take the damned things down and put up some reproductions out of *Ogonyok*. Come on, take 'em down."

Together they ripped down the yellow sheets; a cloud of dust swirled through the room.

"You'll have to sweep up again. Was it you who swept the place out today?"

"Yes."

"Well, what are these statistics you're talking about?" Klyucharev asked, resuming his seat on the stool. He had come without any definite plan, prompted only by a feeling that it was to the Komsomols that he ought to go to talk about everything that had been worrying him since his meeting with Kandyba.

"The usual things, Fyodor Adrianovich: how the hay-making went, how the harvest has started, whether the MTS is prepared, the composition of the teams. How many meetings have been held, how many new members this quarter, the number of youth brigades that have been formed. Here are the questions." Pavel fingered five or six sheets typed in pale letters and the thin cigarette-paper rustled faintly like the dried wings of a dragonfly.

"I see.... So we seem to be doing the same thing ten times over. The district executive committee will answer those questions, so will the district Party committee, and the district Komsomol committee too, as well as each kolkhoz separately. Do you have any time left for work?"

Pavel smiled in confusion.

"But you know we haven't a second secretary here. The instructor's pretty green too."

Pavel had been at this job for a year and a half and had got into the local habit of deprecating the work of the Komsomol district committee at Glubin, with the comforting afterthought that the weaknesses were not noticeable against the general background.

"How long were you away this time?" Klyucharev asked sharply with a swift glance aside.

"Three days," Pavel replied unthinkingly.

"That means that for the three days the first secretary was away the district Komsomol committee did no work."

Klyucharev picked up a calendar that lay on the desk and tore off a number of dusty date slips.

"That's right," said Pavel with ingenuous pleasure. "When I'm not here nobody does anything...."

"Working to orders, eh? What are you, a foreman or a secretary?"

Pavel sat with his head bowed. His big liquid black eyes had suddenly lost their sparkle and a blank expression spread over his face. He looked like a schoolboy who was waiting to be reprimanded by his teacher. The reprimand was well deserved, the schoolboy recognized his error but... there was nothing he could do about it.

Klyucharev, however, did not administer any reprimand, he looked at Pavel silently with mixed feelings of pity and vexation. For a few seconds the only sound in the room was the even ticking of a clock on the wall.

Klyucharev had been a Party member for fourteen years but he always remembered with gratitude that red-letter day, in December when together with a group of boys and girls of his own age he had crossed the threshold of the district Komsomol committee for the first time....

They had walked from the village about eight kilometres along the railway line, over a bridge that rang

to the tramp of their feet, through a coppice thickly hung with snowy webs, across sugar-white fields on which the soles of their felt boots left round tracks. They had not noticed the distance. The wind blew at their backs, hurrying them along, sweeping a path for them...

Klyuchárev recollected how nervous they had felt as they sat outside the door of the first secretary's office, feverishly repeating the regulations of the Komsomol Rules, straightening each other's shirts, smoothing down their hair. And then with beating hearts they had gone one by one into the office.

He had been asked only a few questions, the usual ones about the rules and the programme, and about his school marks, but his answers sounded as if he were speaking both for the past and for the future. He well remembered the secretary of that village committee, a very grown-up man, it seemed to him at fifteen.

The secretary had spoken in a loud excited voice with a slight stammer, and when he had turned suddenly to someone his elbow had dragged the edge of the red table-cloth and the tumbler beside the decanter had tipped over. The secretary caught it as it fell and laughed as he exchanged glances with the other members of the bureau. They had laughed back at him. For some reason Klyucharev remembered that little incident very vividly and later he often found himself thinking that he didn't care for very calm people with their even voices and chary gestures. But if he ever caught a casual glimpse of something that reminded him of that first Komsomol secretary or heard people laugh in that loud hearty way or felt his hand grasped with the firmness and impetuosity with which it had been grasped that day, his spirits would always rise. The enthusiasms of his youth, which no subsequent meetings with people more prominent

maybe than that modest village secretary could wipe out, left an indelible impression on Klyucharev.

Now that he was himself a grown man in a position of authority he knew that all work has not only its vivid moments of spiritual exaltation but its humdrum side too. That, of course, was as it should be. But he was not one to live for the humdrum. Routine work was tolerable only because it too reflected a gleam of the days of celebration that lay ahead: November the 7th, May Day and that day which was yet to come—the Day of Communism.

Klyucharev recollected once more that Bolshany beauty Serafima, so young and full of vitality. But he doubted whether on receiving her Komsomol membership card she would take out of this room with her an image of Pavel Gorban, her older friend for life.

"Very well, Pavel," he said, breaking the oppressive silence. "I don't intend to lecture you. I didn't come here for that. I simply wanted to tell you about something I saw. I've just passed a wedding procession. Coming from Luchesy, I believe. Both bride and bridegroom are of Komsomol age. I don't think they're overpious; I suppose they see our Soviet films and read our books, and that there's still time for them to join the Komsomol. But here they are today beginning their life together by going to church. Why is it, you think?"

Pavel, who had been sitting with his head dropped, his bushy dark brows knitted in a tortured expression, now looked up in response to Klyucharev's friendly tone.

"This is a difficult locality to work in, Fyodor Adriannovich," he said, taking up a habitual defensive stand. "People have grown up with a certain outlook...."

"So you think it's only a matter of deep-rooted habit? But what about the eastern regions of Byelorussia? Why, you're from there yourself, aren't you?"

"Yes, from Mozyr."

"Well, we've had a good many cases recently of young people getting married in church or having their babies baptized. Sometimes they laugh at it themselves but they go all the same. D'you know what one girl said to me? She said it was so pretty in church. It turns out that Kandyba can put on a pretty show for them to remember all their lives, and we can't. Isn't that something to be ashamed of?"

"It is," said Pavel with ardent conviction. "Fyodor Adrianovich, I've often thought it must be dull for young people to hear us talking only about work and study to them. . . . Of course, those are the main things, I realize that," he added hastily and stopped in confusion.

Klyucharev looked at him and shook his head.

"In my opinion the main thing in life is life itself. Surely we don't live merely to work. We work and study and attend courses to raise our qualifications in order to live, don't you understand? To live to the full extent of our feelings and strength. To live well, splendidly. Never mind that we can't afford everything yet. Not long ago I was preparing a report and looking up some figures for it. During the war about half a million cottages were burned down in Byelorussia. Something to rebuild, eh? But we did it. And did some things better than before too. Abroad they call it a miracle, and a miracle it was, I grant you. But it wasn't God's miracle, we performed it ourselves. Because we are what we are and not different. Now, I hope, you'll understand why we mustn't say that one day we're busy growing flax and the next take up village libraries: what we're busy-ing ourselves with every day is life, our Soviet life. D'you understand?"

At that moment Klyucharev's plain, sun-tanned face was lit up with enthusiasm and looked almost handsome. And though what he had been saying Pavel had known for a long time, read in newspapers, heard over

the radio, repeated himself more than once at conferences, now every word had a special significance for him, sounding like a confession of faith, like that treasure for which a man lives in our hard but, when all is said and done, fine life.

Pavel kept his eyes glued on Klyucharev's face and, naturally, did not even suspect that Klyucharev himself almost heard his own heart beating.

"D'y you know what I would like to see?" Klyucharev went on. "We're always talking about one big family but in reality we only feel ourselves a family in very difficult moments during a war or when there's a very hard job of work to be done. But why should a man feel himself on his own in good times? That's the time for a private life, we're told. To hell with that! I simply don't believe it. How can a man split his heart in two? That part for work, that part for love. But perhaps man only works for the sake of his love, and loves the woman because they have common work.

"We are now only taking up questions of people's private lives when something's gone wrong. A chap deserts his wife or stops paying alimony. But where were we when the trouble began? After all, trouble doesn't come overnight, like toadstools after a summer shower. What sort of girl has our comrade married, who has that girl chosen? Do we ever give a thought to things like that? Oh no, that would be intruding on their privacy. But think, Pavel: a couple gets married, isn't that everybody's business, something for all to celebrate? They should be met, accompanied to the registry office, given presents, the secretary of the Komsomol committee ought to make a speech at the wedding supper. Why d'y you shake your head? There are other things to speak of than about the per cent fulfilment of the plan, you know, I mean a speech that comes from the heart. Why, you can read a poem:

*Her wealth is not silver, nor diamonds, nor gold—
The keys of your happiness lie in her hold.*

"I think those lines were written specially for weddings. The kolkhoz ought to advance them the money, and their friends will help them build a cottage in their spare time: don't worry, they're young, they'll pay it back in work. Let's have whole village streets of young couples. We sometimes throw money and energy away on much more hare-brained schemes than that. Oh, and how they'll treasure a cottage built that way! It won't be a house either of 'em will find it easy to quit after a family quarrel: they'd not be able to look their comrades in the face for shame. Sometimes, you know, lives are ruined over trivial things. And if the cause is serious, well, it's better to sort it out in consultation with others than on your own. Sometimes the best way is to take each party by the hand and let 'em take their two different ways, no need to deceive themselves or other people. Don't worry your heart out, that doesn't help anyone. We're not Christian martyrs, we're Communists. Sacrifice yourselves for the sake of the children? I wonder whether that sort of sacrifice is of much use to the children. Better to grow up without a father or mother, knowing that things went wrong and putting up with it bravely, than to hear family rows day in, day out, and see repressed hatred and lies which, God forbid, many a child may take to be normal family life. What sort of people will those kids grow up to be? You know, I was a teacher once and I thought a lot about those things."

Klyucharev fell silent at last, his eyes concentrated on a point straight before them. Evidently what he had said had a deep interest for him.

"Oh, how I want life to be beautiful and decent for all." The words broke from Pavel's mouth involuntarily. He sat, supporting his head between both hands, deep

in thought, as if applying Klyucharev's words to his own life too.

"So do I, very much," said Klyucharev with a sigh. "But how is it to be done?"

"I don't know," Pavel admitted candidly, facing Klyucharev's eyes squarely. He was expecting a ready answer but it was some time before Klyucharev said:

"I don't always know myself. But we have to know. We have to."

The telephone rang. Pavel took the receiver and handed it at once to Klyucharev. People, it seemed, had been looking for him all over the town. There was a message for him: details were required urgently about all the collective farms. The hay-making results, the harvest prospects, how many days the agricultural machines lay idle and the reasons for non-fulfilment of plans. . . .

"You see? Now it's my turn to answer these same questions. I'll have to go though I meant to drive with you over to Luchesy. Is your motorbike in order?"

"No. I rode on it from Bratichi and it needs a general overhaul again. It doesn't make any difference though. I'll have to deal with all these papers."

"Listen! Leave them be," said Klyucharev with sudden resolve. "I'll give you all the statistics you want. You'd do better to look after your Komsomol work. In a day or two we'll go over to Luchesy. Tomorrow, maybe."

CHAPTER FIVE

MAN ON THE RIGHT JOB

1

On July the 31st Glubin was swept by a whirlwind. Sand and dust were carried whistling up into the yellow sky; newspapers, torn from the wall boards,

swirled through the streets. Before people had time to rub their eyes and rush to shut the windows the rain came down in sheets.

The downpour was terrific. It at once made the roads round Glubin impassable. All communications were cut off; no letters or newspapers arrived: the mail plane couldn't land for two days running.

The clock in Klyucharev's office ticked steadily on, the hands circled the dial, yet he felt as though time stood still. That grey impenetrable curtain of rain seemed to be severing him from the rest of the world. Thrusting his papers aside he kept jumping up and dashing to the window or savagely turning the handle of his telephone.

"Fyodor Adrianovich!" district committee instructor Snezhko shouted, appearing in the door. He shook his wet tousled hair. "What are we going to do? Lyubikov's had it in the neck. Why, only yesterday he spread his flax out—you know, that tip-top quality they were getting ready for the exhibition. Team-leader Eva Ilchuk hadn't slept for nights. The poor girl worked herself off her feet over that flax."

A picture rose before Klyucharev's mind—a still lake of a field, blue with blossom.... He winced at the thought, but when he opened his eyes again they were grey and narrow, the very colour of the sky that day.

"Well, then, be off with you to Bratichi," he hissed. "Get people together and tell them all their work's been wasted. Is that what you want to do?... Look here, man, take a cloth and wipe your face." He was calmer now. "You're dripping like a drowned man."

Snezhko wiped his face in silence.

"The kolkhoz won't be ruined if Lyubikov loses a few hectares of flax. And then he's sure to think of something. He doesn't sit around moping in his office like you do here. You'd do better to think about Dvortsy and

Pyatigostichi and Luchesy. They sent a combine to Valyushitsky not long ago; what if it got stuck on the road? Dvortsy hasn't got any confidence in its own forces, the first storm might knock them off their feet. Get them on the phone, give 'em a bit of encouragement. And don't panic, that's the main thing. We'll not reach the kolkhozes today so we'd better deal with the office work."

When Snezhko had closed the door quietly behind him Klyucharev drew a pile of papers to him with an air of determination and rang for his assistant.

"There's nothing to be done about it today," he said, listening to the rain thudding hollowly on the ground. "But first thing tomorrow morning I want to see Chernenko, the chairman of the district trade department, then the manager of the tea-house—that's a place that's long wanted putting in order.... Oh yes, Filippov too." Klyucharev had suddenly remembered Zhenya's angry eyes. ("They've got nothing, they're drawing wall maps in pencil.") "Yes, I want to see the head of the district educational office. A bit later, though."

During the night the storm spent itself a bit. The rain fell less heavily as though the clouds were draining their last drops. But the roads remained impassable. Klyucharev sat glowering in his office, forcing himself to do the things he had planned for himself the day before though his eyes kept straying to the window. The rain might have been mocking him: it would stop altogether and he would start looking for the sun to break through and run its hot tongue licking the wounds on the scarred earth, and then down would come the rain again with all its old violence. During one of these short downpours when the streaming water traced waves on the window-panes Klyucharev noticed someone riding along the street wearing a drenched rainskin with a hood. The horse was going at a full canter but the rain

was so noisy that Klyucharev could not hear the clatter of its hoofs on the cobble-stones of Glubin's main street. The whole scene flashed like something out of a silent film.

Who could it be? Klyucharev wondered as he moved to the window. He felt a strange constriction in his breath.

But the rider had already turned the corner and gone to the stables.

A few minutes later the office door was flung open and a woman strode in. She was still moving, it seemed, with the momentum of her impetuous riding.

"Comrade Klyucharev," she called from the door in a high-pitched voice as she dropped her hood to her shoulders. "How much longer do I have to put up with this? I'm not going to leave this room until—"

Water streamed from her wet glistening hair, her angrily knitted brows were as dark as if they had been drawn with charcoal.

Klyucharev hurried towards her. She tossed her rain-coat aside, revealing that she was clad in high boots and a tight-fitting doctor's smock: evidently, she had come straight from the surgery. Klyucharev took the raincoat—it was so drenched that it weighed like iron—and fumbled for some time with a coat-hanger.

A smell of humid air struck his face, a reminder that beyond the walls of his office there was a spacious world with rain-clouds floating immaterially in the dizzy heights....

"What's wrong, Antonina Andreyevna?" he asked a moment later, turning to the woman. He was as polite and calm as ever. "Please take a seat and tell me everything in the right order."

Antonina Andreyevna, however, simply leaned with one hand on the leather back of a chair. She was a tall woman, just turned twenty-eight.

She regarded Klyucharev with an unfriendly, almost contemptuous expression.

"It's difficult to tell things in *order*, when there isn't any, Comrade secretary."

Klyucharev's face clouded. He sat at his desk.

"Go on, please," he said.

Antonina Andreyevna dropped into a chair and drew a deep breath.

She was facing Klyucharev. All the little light that came through the window that day fell on her face and shoulders.

To Klyucharev she resembled a personification of winter in her white smock buttoned up tightly to the throat and her plainly hostile expression. No, he had no illusions, her heart was locked to him and every time he tried to approach her he came up against a stone wall.

Biting his lips he listened to her voice and tried to make out what she was talking about. It seemed that Grön, the chairman of Luchesy kolkhoz, was holding up delivery of food ordered from him a fortnight before. The hospital was without firewood. The orderlies were gathering brushwood in the forest. There was nothing to give the patients, the flour bin was empty and there were no fresh vegetables. And this in the middle of summer when the markets were overflowing with apples and tomatoes.

"I'll scare the life out of him," said Klyucharev sullenly, and he reached for the telephone.

Though Antonina Andreyevna did not smile, her face softened a little.

"Luchesy, Luchesy," Klyucharev called, then, turning back to her, asked:

"Is this the first time you've clashed like that with the chairman?"

"The thousand and first."

"Why didn't you—"

She shrugged.

"I'm used to dealing with difficulties myself, Comrade secretary."

"But here you are, all the same," he said archly, turning the handle of the telephone. "Maybe you'll wait while I try to get through to him."

"I was not going to leave till you did," said Antonina boldly.

Rising to her feet she began to walk slowly about the room, examining the furniture with a look of indifference on her face.

Klyucharev's assistant tapped discreetly on the door.

"Why doesn't Luchesy reply?" snapped Klyucharev.

"We've not been able to get through since morning, Fyodor Adrianovich."

"I'll get through all right," Klyucharev assured him, and with an unexpected laugh asked, "Anybody waiting to see me?"

"Chernenko."

Antonina turned her head.

"Am I in the way?"

"Not at all."

The day's work took its normal course but Klyucharev felt as though a gust of wind had swept away the feeling of gloomy apathy that had possessed him since the morning. What did a bit of rain matter? he asked himself with bold cheerfulness. It wasn't the first time they'd seen rain in those parts.

"Alexei!" he shouted happily into the mouthpiece when at last he heard Lyubikov's faint voice which sounded as if it came from another planet.

"The wind has blown the flax into the river, Fyodor Adrianovich. The team-leader's in tears...."

"Get your boats out."

"We've done that. Where the devil did that whirlwind come from? It's pure gold that's gone into the Glubin."

"If it's pure then it'll be all right," Klyucharev said with a mischievous laugh. "The main thing is to console Eva Ilchuk. Her tears are worth more than any gold. . . . Tell her that from me."

Chernenko came in. The chairman of the district consumer cooperative society was a lean young-looking man with neatly trimmed side-whiskers. He was wearing a shiny mackintosh. Klyucharev fired a question at him before the man had time to sit down:

"Tell me, Comrade Chernenko, do you want to work with us in the district or don't you?"

"What can I do on my own?"

He knew what to expect. His eyes looked hurt. Meeting Antonina's glance he bowed politely to her and coloured faintly.

"There's a lot you can do. You're not an unskilled labourer in a brick works who'd be justified in asking what he could do on his own if someone told him to build a house. You're the manager, you've got people working for you. Your trouble is that you haven't made up your mind what's your right place in life. You haven't got your heart in your job. Lenin used to say that even a market stall makes politics, and we haven't got stalls but Soviet shops in our district. Why are cucumbers and tomatoes rotting in the kolkhozes and they're not selling 'em to you?"

"But they haven't fulfilled their state deliveries yet."

"You don't visit the kolkhozes enough, you don't get about and talk to people. And as for the tea-house it's as bad as in the days of natural economy: you don't bring anything in from outside—not a barrel of herrings, not a tin of meat. And the bread's filthy. I bet you don't eat it yourself."

Klyucharev picked up the receiver and rang up the manager of the bakery.

"What kind of bread do you eat at home? Will you mind if I drop in and see? What's that? All right, bring a loaf over to my office. Today's baking."

Chernenko could hardly wait for Klyucharev to finish his phone call.

"Everybody blames me," he said with unexpected vehemence. "If it isn't you it's Pinchuk. And on top of that I get all kinds of agents dropping on me every week. They come in pairs, they do, to keep each other company on the road. They inspect and make threats and issue orders but I get no help from them at all. They sent me some lovely posters: 'Drink Soviet Champagne!' Give me ten van-loads of wine and I'll sell the lot."

Antonina watched Chernenko in astonishment: Klyucharev had certainly roused the fellow a bit. She turned hastily to the window to conceal her smile.

In Glubin, Chernenko was known as Brilliantine Dandy. He wore his hair trimmed low on his neck (he had taught the local barber how to do it), and applied so much oil that it shone as if it had been varnished. His shirts, ties and jackets were all of the latest fashion, which had far to go before reaching Glubin. Chernenko maintained a bachelor establishment though a year before a woman with a baby had turned up from somewhere to visit him. Without much ado he had left the same day for a trip round the district and when he returned all he had to say to Klyucharev on the subject was:

"You can't call it a family. We were never registered."

On that occasion Klyucharev had clenched his teeth and let the man go. What loops a man's private life can make round him sometimes, he thought gloomily. A sort like that will creep out of every snare and even

take refuge behind the letter of the law and cry, "Don't touch me!"

He was still speaking to Chernenko when the manager of the bakery—a dark-complexioned man with greying hair—came limping into the office, carrying a loaf. Klyucharev took the loaf from his hands, felt it, sniffed it and waved his hand in disgust.

"Why, it doesn't even smell like bread. It's as heavy as lead."

His fingers drumming on the desk, he asked out of the blue:

"Will you take on the tea-house?"

The manager folded his hands sedately on his knees.

"No, I won't. There it's even harder to please everyone: some say the bread's too sour, others say the soup's too salty. I'd rather be cutting wood in the forest than that. That's my point of view."

Klyucharev cast him a hard steady glance. He seemed to be weighing him up.

"I see, so it doesn't suit your game that our people are asking more of life now. You'd like 'em to drink sour ale and not grouse. To buy half-baked bread and not raise a murmur. To wear the ugly jerseys they knit for us. Oh no, Comrade Zakharevich, that won't do. If this were the Poland of the *pans* you wouldn't spare your feet, I know that, and you'd be wiping every glass ten times before you put it on the table. Now you feel everything's quiet and easy: the Soviets won't leave you without a job. You don't want to take responsibility for a thing, you've turned into a coward, Comrade Zakharevich. Well, we'll remember that."

Although Antonina had been living in the district for over two years she had not met Klyucharev more than a few times; now, sitting to one side, she watched him with interest. Besides the broad smile she knew, she

discovered he had another, a screwed-eyed smile that chilled one to the bone. When he smiled that way and looked straight at a man, with a steely expression in his eyes, it was enough to make the fellow feel a shiver run down his spine and close his lips tight and lose every scrap of desire to laugh the matter off. When that happened Antonina involuntarily wanted to draw herself up to take the blow without lowering her eyes before him. . . .

To her surprise she suddenly discovered that the secret of the influence Klyucharev's personality exercised on people lay in his capacity to arouse their energy and infect them with his own ardour. A man who a moment before would be standing before him with his head hanging would suddenly as it were open his eyes wider and see farther and start saying fervently:

"Yes, we can manage that, we can do that, Fyodor Adrianovich."

Antonina, her mistrust not yet quite allayed, watched Klyucharev while he went on talking with people: he could be caustic and cutting, as impetuous as a cavalry charge. It was difficult to parry those thrusts of his, he'd soon find his way through your defence. But he'd break off halfway through a phrase if he saw that it wasn't fear of the boss or a sense of personal aggrievement but doubts of the correctness of his own case that were rising in the man he was addressing—doubts that would keep the man from sleeping at night.

He usually finished with a "Think it over. We're not going to be easy with you. Think it over."

Yet at the same time the liveliness of his gestures was combined with moments of reflection when his look became intent, even sad.

Once, when they had a few moments to themselves, Klyucharev picked up the telephone receiver again but replaced it immediately.

"Sometimes I feel so tired," he said guiltily, "that I think I'd like to sleep for eighteen hours."

"Chronic lack of sleep," said Antonina sternly, looking at him for the first time with the eyes of a doctor.

Only now and again did she drop a word as she sat with her head half turned away. For his part, Klyucharev rarely looked in her direction either. Just now and again he would steal a glance out of the corner of an eye, silently asking her, "Was that right? D'you agree?"

He was not one to bother about his gestures or tone of voice, he wanted to get things right inside him, and that made him so natural in those short seconds of silent conversation.

"How handsome a man becomes when he's working," thought Antonina to herself surprisingly.

But when in came a small tearful-eyed woman, wearing a patterned shawl crossed over her flat bosom, and started complaining about some other, younger woman, Antonina turned to the window with an oppressive feeling that she could not get rid of. She did not want to see Klyucharev just then.

Grey clouds drifted sullenly overhead. The mossy branch of a sharp-tipped fir-tree touched the windowsill and from every needle drops of rain rolled down slowly. How long had she been sitting there, oblivious of time? Antonina was about to rise but checked herself on hearing Klyucharev say:

"I'll have a word with your husband. I'll do all I can...."

His voice sounded curiously toneless and when Antonina turned to him with a silent question in her eyes he muttered shyly:

"You see, I have that sort of thing to deal with too, Antonina Andreyevna."

She averted her eyes, feeling suddenly profoundly tired and sad as if what had just happened was an almost

exact repetition of something in the remote past. Ten years is not a short time but it seems the new skin that covers the wound retains a little of the old pain. Antonina's head dropped lower and lower.

Klyucharev was too preoccupied to notice this, however; he rose and, with his back to the window, said in a low voice:

"And sometimes I lose heart too...."

"You mustn't." She looked into his face anxiously.

"Why not?" he asked, almost sadly.

"I must go, Fyodor Adrianovich," she said after a brief silence. "I'll leave it to you to speak to Luchesy."

After she had left and Klyucharev had watched the hooded rider melt into the drifting clouds, he walked away from the window and sank heavily into a chair. That day suddenly seemed to him to have been endless, an entire lifetime—and now he stood alone on the threshold of the night.

The chief of the women's department came in. Her fair hair was thrown back behind the ears in that careless manner it pleases some women to adopt.

"I want to see you about Doctor Lukashevich. Yes, yes, Antonina Andreyevna, who's just been here." She pursed her lips sternly. "I've received information that she takes too much interest in private beekeeping—has five hives of them—and what's more, on hospital territory. I thought I had better inform you about it."

Antonina rode back to Luchesy through the gathering dusk. Her horse, of local breed, picked its own way across the boggy meadows. A strong odour of mint and savory rose from the damp grass. All the plants of the marshes—bulrushes, beard-grass, water-lilies—added

their breath to the steamy air. The humid air was not refreshing—it was close and sultry.

Antonina flung the heavy hood of her waterproof on to her shoulders and her damp hair hung untidily against her cheeks.

She could still feel Klyucharev's eyes on her. It was as though she had opened a book somewhere in the middle, read a few lines and closed it with a "I've read nothing of it."

"It does not concern me," she repeated to herself, her brows tensing in a stubborn frown. "No, it does not concern me."

She even gave the horse a touch of the crop as if wanting to get away all the quicker from Glubin with its cover of lowering clouds, from Klyucharev's office, from those eager eyes, those unspoken words.

Antonina's attitude to Klyucharev was somewhat equivocal. By nature distrustful and slow to make up her mind, she retained deep within her something childishly naïve and romantic (though that romanticism found expression mostly in her work, in reading, only rarely in her attitude to other people), and she was always suspicious of any manifestations of ebullience or forcefulness, fearing that they concealed a lack of sincerity or hypocrisy. When she had met Klyucharev the first time, two years before, at Luchesy, he had made a deep and favourable impression on her. He had arrived, gathered together the team-leaders and livestock managers of the kolkhoz and, running his fingers through his hair, asked:

"Well, comrades, how are we going to work in future?"

But sometimes it seemed to her that all Klyucharev's sincerity and warm-heartedness was frittering itself away without results. One day she was present when Pinchuk was trying to reach Klyucharev on the phone.

"What did you say? He's busy? Making a speech?" And with a faint smile he informed Antonina, "He's making a speech."

Though these words came from Pinchuk, Antonina had felt personally offended by them. She turned away sharply. Through the window, in a cold blue light, she saw a man pass in grey work boots and a faded quilted jacket. He was carrying a pile of notebooks tied together with a length of cord. A stiff breeze was blowing and the whole street was littered with swirling leaves....

Oh, what do I care for their Glubin, she had asked herself irritatedly on that occasion. What did it matter to her what these people thought of each other?

Everyone has in his life some older person to whom he looks up with respect. And even when we grow older this unchanging image—a former commanding officer, a school-teacher, one's own father perhaps—accompanies us through life, and we try to live up to him in difficult moments, and answer for our actions to him.

In Velikiye Luki where Antonina was born and grew up, besides those officials who after working for a year or two were transferred elsewhere, leaving behind them a good or bad name—besides these there had been a man who had become so much a part of the town for the sixty years that he lived in it that it seemed hard to imagine the place without him. When Vitaly Nikodimovich Lyarovsky, who had been a Zemstvo doctor in tsarist days, walked down a street in Velikiye Luki hats came off as if the wind had removed them in respect for this lean sarcastic old man. For many years he had been working as a tuberculosis specialist and roentgenologist but, faithful to his old ways, he always attended difficult confinements and was always ready to go into the night to visit a sick child if a distraught, weeping mother came to him. He was among the first to re-

turn to Velikiye Luki after the town had been liberated and amidst the smoking rubble he had organized a town dispensary in a basement. The front was quite near, but people were streaming back to the town along every road. They found the place unrecognizable: where houses had stood craters yawned, there was a wide meadow where houses had lined the embankment and the Lovat ran uncontrolled between low snow-clad banks. People who had spent all their lives in Velikiye Luki looked around in bewilderment and greeted each other heartily. And then everyone would ask: "What about Vitaly Nikodimovich? Has he come back? Is he still alive?"

"Yes, he's back. He's taking patients and going his rounds as usual."

The old doctor had treated Antonina when, at five, she fell ill with pneumonia. Once a year she went to his dispensary for a check-up; later, she took courses in nursing and it was he who examined her; and then, having made up her mind to become a doctor—which she considered the noblest profession of all—she decided to go to medical college. During the past years the old doctor had not exchanged more than a dozen words with her but after every exam she never failed to send him a postcard. When, finally, she received her appointment to remote Glubin, she returned to Velikiye Luki and for the first time climbed the steep cool staircase of the new house where Vitaly Nikodimovich was now living.

It was he who opened the door to her.

"Good-evening, doctor," he said, flinging wide the door and bowing respectfully.

All that evening she sat in the doctor's study, a narrow room full of books. It was like a second birth to her. She walked home through the quiet dark streets of the town, a real town with squares and public gardens where little notices warned people off the new-sown

grass. She walked slowly, full of happiness and a sense of deep gratitude. But for that sarcastic old man with the drooping moustache she might now be an engineer, a school-teacher, a bookkeeper, anything you like, but she now felt as pained at this thought as would a girl who looking into the eyes of her sweetheart thinks to herself: "Is it possible that we might never have met in life?"

Antonina was not sentimental, she did not keep Dr. Lyarovsky's photograph with a touching inscription "To my favourite pupil" on it, she simply took into her hands a part of that work which he had not been able to accomplish in his sixty years. More and more often now his age reminded of itself, and he would say vexedly, "Oh, if I could have another life, like Faust."

From that long talk in the night Antonina carried away a mass of half worked-out ideas, unsolved problems. Her head was humming with them.

"Well, looks as if I'd put a hedgehog under your skull," Vitaly Nikodimovich had chuckled into his whiskers as he strode about the room. Then he had stopped in front of her, in the middle of a phrase. "I see your eyes blazing like a tiger's. The only thing I'm afraid of is that you'll go and get married—pots and pans, babies' nappies, lipstick and so on. Oh, don't misunderstand me; women ought to have children, one, at least, otherwise they're like sterile flowers. But look for a man who would be your match, Antonina Andreyevna, someone with whom you can go through life hand in hand."

He was well aware of the misfortune that had befallen her in her short life, he was not passing judgement on her for that, he was simply warning her for the future.

Antonina had a sad story behind her; a burden was laid on her shoulders when she was eighteen, something that could have bent stronger shoulders than hers.

In those days when Dr. Lyarovskiy organized the nurses' training-school in the ruins of Velikiye Luki and the girls obtained their practical experience by working as field hospital nurses, bandaging flesh wounds when troops passed through the city staying only one night, and went on their way carrying in their memories a picture of scorched rubble and stove-chimneys pointing their lonely forms to the sky—in those days people's spirits were strangely elated and it was for that reason perhaps that many acted rashly, without consideration for the consequences.

Colonel Anatoly Sergeyevich Orekhov was forty when he met Antonina—that was in '43—but he told her he was thirty-nine because, after all, there were three or four months to go before he turned forty. A tall, dark-browed lean man, grizzled at the temples—which only served to heighten the effect of youth given by his eyes and movements—he was of highly presentable appearance. One day he came down the steps into the basement that Dr. Lyarovskiy had fitted out as a dispensary and with a guilty scowl of pain pulled up his tunic which carried the insignia of a colonel: on his back was the scar of a recent wound; it had cicatrized badly and was now giving him gyp, he said, at the worst of times.

The basement room, partitioned by coarse sheets into a reception-room, a consulting-room, an operating theatre and even a hospital with one bed in a corner, smelt of hot alcohol. Dr. Lyarovskiy merely nodded at Antonina: tampon, bowl, instruments. She glanced shyly from under the white kerchief bound low almost to the line of her eyebrows, and later the colonel seemed to be drawing strength from that look of compassion, fright and admiration as she kept her eyes glued on him, and did not cry out, did not wince, only grew pale at the pain. He was still looking at her, head turned, his eyes soft and a little perplexed, when she was bandaging his

back tightly, touching his skin with her warm hands. He did not leave the dispensary at once, he had to lie and rest a little on a wooden bench, worrying so much because his unit did not know where its commanding officer had disappeared for several hours that Antonina at length volunteered to go to Headquarters with a note from him. He watched, biting his lips, as she stood on tiptoe reaching with the impetuous movement of a child for a quilted coat off a nail in the wall and thrust her feet into a pair of old felt boots. When she returned dusted with snow, he had the impression that he had felt her arrival before he heard her footsteps. He drew her gently to him, made her sit on the edge of the bench, and she responded so trustfully that his hands automatically became more careful and respectful of her modesty. When Antonina went off duty he insisted on seeing her home through the dark streets of the front line town and as he walked beside her he kept thinking with bitter chagrin that in a few more years he would lose the capacity to respond to the tender eyes of a girl in the headlong, all-absorbing way he was doing now. Or more likely, indeed, a screaming splinter of steel would strike him as he topped a parapet somewhere, robbing him even of those last years of his manhood—of the “Indian summer” of his life: And his head swam with a desperate desire to crush in his arms now, at that very minute, the girl’s shoulders in a clumsy coat damp from the melting snow and ask her, his lips close to her face, “Dear unknown girl, do you love me, ever so little?”

A few days later Orekhov’s unit left Velikiye Luki but before it did so the colonel, calling to say good-bye to her, suddenly proposed that Antonina should leave with him, as his wife. She agreed and her face wore that joyous, trustful expression it always assumed when she looked at him. There was no one to warn her, her

only defence was that truthful naïve look. Perhaps it was this look that made the colonel feel ashamed of his original intentions for he took the plunge and Antonina became his lawful wedded wife.

For a year she followed him in his campaigning, devoting herself earnestly, almost religiously to making their temporary quarters comfortable; she carried about with her a collection of German table-linen and china, and she learned how to unpack it all and set it out in half an hour on a chance table or on a couple of packing-cases stood together. It was all the same to her: wherever they were was their home. The general heard about her, came and took a look at her and apparently did not have the heart to separate her from her husband; and she always had an escort of young lieutenants and captains who cast her looks of respectful adoration.

Then one day when the army's swift advance was stalled somewhere near Siauliai their unit was temporarily billeted in an old white-pillared mansion whose owner, a Baron Ropp, had fled to Germany. Under the crystal chandeliers of a high-ceilinged hall the ardent lieutenants assembled all the furniture they found intact: little pink padded stools, Louis Quinze armchairs, kitchen stools; the company was merry, the table spread with tinned food and ration bread. The wine from the baron's cellars had been poured out, the aluminium mugs clinked noisily and the first toast was drunk when all of a sudden the door opened. Because of the noise at the table nobody heard anything untoward but Antonina suddenly saw Orekhov's face assume an ashen hue that she had never seen on it before. Aghast, she was the last to turn towards the door. For a moment she did not realize what was happening.

At the door stood a middle-aged woman with eyes that were blurred with extreme fatigue. One hand clutched the handle of a travelling pack, the other held the arm

of a little girl, thin, pale as an icicle, and wearing a fur hat on her head. A boy of about sixteen, on crutches, stood a little in front of them, screening them with his shoulders, and his hard unfriendly eyes, passing Antonina with complete indifference, rested on Orekhov.

"Well, Anatoly, I've brought the children," said the woman with frightful simplicity. "It's over a year since you last wrote, you weren't easy to find, but I'm past clutching at any stupid pride now. I've no strength left in me, understand? Nina, Victor, go to your father."

The children did not move, only the boy thrust his head forward a little. Everything about him showed that he was ready to defend his mother and sister against any insult.

Antonina felt the eyes of all the hushed officers turn swiftly to her, as though in response to a command, and then as swiftly turn away. A second later the room was in confusion: the woman was offered three chairs at once; a major, one of the oldest of the men present, squatted down in front of the little girl and started unbuttoning her overcoat. The men's clumsy bustling movements made the table lamps flicker and smoke; Antonina, feeling quite unwanted, walked quietly out of the room, gasping for air. But then she remembered running aimlessly, unseeingly up the stairs and the very floor seemed to be rocking as she ran up and up, faster and faster. It was the major who found her the next morning and who lifted her from the heap of rags in the attic on which she had lain crying all night. As he led her out on the attic stairs, bumping his head on a beam, he swore profusely to hide his embarrassment. Antonina was shivering violently.

"This is how it is," he said. "Apparently, they have never been legally married although she and the children have adopted his name. So in a formal sense you are his real wife."

He talked to her in a serious, worried tone, that of an older man talking to someone younger than himself. He was no longer tender with her but there was no indignation in his voice, and for that Antonina was grateful to him from the bottom of her heart. She had been feeling that she was quite alone in the world and now out of the blue this man had come looking for her, offering her help. She wiped her eyes and they went down together, meeting no one luckily for it was still very early in the morning. The major kept casting grave expectant glances at her from the corner of his eyes.

When they reached the room Antonina had shared with her husband, Colonel Orekhov started towards her but on seeing the major sank back on his chair by the window-sill.

"Tonya," he murmured. He seemed to have aged in the night. He looked pitifully bewildered. No one spoke for a moment. Then he went on, mumbling, even attempting a wry smile, "It'll all be straightened out in the end. She's crazy! What can she do? You're my real wife. All she is entitled to is alimony."

Instinctively Antonina looked at the major for support, and, meeting that grave, expectant glance again, she walked rapidly over to her suit-case, rummaged among the silk nightdresses and dressing-gowns—all German stuff—and drew out her little brown passport. Then, thumbing through the pages, she found the one which bore the stamp of her marriage registration and with trembling fingers tore it out.

"Look! There goes the marriage stamp. It's all over. Everything."

Then she cried again on the major's shoulder, but that was in some other room. Meanwhile two silent young officers were roping her luggage.

"Get away as quickly as you can, Tonya. Get away from this place," the major kept on telling her. "You're

young, you have all your life before you. Go away and forget it all."

They put her into a car that went her way, whispered something into the driver's ear that ensured that she was not bothered by too much questioning on the road, and off she went on a long journey, changing cars several times. At last she reached Velikiye Luki and there she completed her nursing course and went on to college.

Antonina was twenty-five when she obtained her diploma and was appointed to Glubin. Before being put in charge of a newly opened neat little hospital at Luchesy, only just free of the scaffolding, she did six months' work at Dvortsy, the most backward, remote and unapproachable place in the district.

She was happy there despite all: there was no one she missed and she sought no one's company. The teacher at the local primary school, a noisy, talkative girl, used to drop in to see her every evening but soon took offence at what she considered Antonina's superior manner. Later however she came to respect and listen to her, like a little sister listens to an elder one. Antonina lived in a cottage whose one room was partitioned by a curtain, but as it turned out, that curtain was nearly always drawn aside and the children used to play while the woman of the house sat at her spinning-wheel on the wide bench against the wall on which Antonina made her bed at night.

"White soil doesn't produce good millet," the woman would say, expressing in this veiled form her disapproval of Antonina's passion for cleanliness. "You come from the 'white' lands, and we—what are we? We belong to the Polesie marshes. That's the way it is."

Antonina was untalkative by nature. She went about her business silently, without a look for other folk. Perhaps it was this manner of hers that made so deep an

impression on her landlady who was a nagging soul. Had not her own husband referred to her in moments of temper as the sort "it's a good thing to have few of"?

Practically the whole of Dvortsy was illiterate: in the old days there had not been even a Polish elementary school there. The code of behaviour was summed up in rough trenchant sayings, an unwritten book of proverbs which covered every event in human life. The border between West and East Byelorussia was one of time; sometimes it seemed to Antonina that this place was living the life of a hundred years ago. And from day to day she felt a growing sense of responsibility, silent but stubborn, for those people, and a longing to put every ounce of her strength into rooting out the old primitive Polesie, so that normal Soviet life could establish itself there firmly.

She was taking it so much to heart that she sometimes thought with annoyance of the writers of the past like Kuprin and Korolenko who had found so much poetry in the deep thickets, the rotting marshes, the poverty-stricken folk muddled by superstition.

Sometimes her landlady would shout at the children playing near Antonina's bench, "Don't spit in the fire, your face will break out in boils," or, "Don't turn your cap in your hands, it'll give you a headache," "God forbid that you should step on the broom with bare feet—you'll get the cramps."

What irritated Antonina most of all was the way the woman always said, whether there was occasion for it or not: "We're not people, we're Polesians."

In time this humility and self-abasement of the people of Polesie, which shocked her so much at first, turned out on closer inspection to be simply an upper defensive crust concealing a steadfast reserved nature.

So now Antonina felt the way her own life looked in the eyes of these people to be of particular importance.

When the Polesian pine forest roared outside the timber walls of the cottage with their coating of clay and chalk and a deep powerful breath of wind drove the resinous smoke back down the chimney, she noticed how her landlady's daughters sat for hours, almost motionless, watching her as she turned over the pages of her book. And there was so much ingenuous attention in their fixed stare that she yearned to do something big and selfless without the slightest delay.

And then that responsibility, that work seemed to her all that she required in life. Just that and nothing else. Before her eyes she kept the splendid example of old Doctor Lyarovsky. She wanted to follow his example.

3

Now was the season of dark quiet nights. The starlit sky arched low over the earth. When the tiny flare of a shooting star sped across the sky the whole universe seemed to spring to life and the shaggy stars stirred and crawled still lower. From the bridge they even seemed to be touching the water and glittering on its surface. The stars looked as if they had been scattered by a fist that found them too hot to hold, and now in August they were cooling off in the windless sky.

Through Bolshany the night watchman walked sounding his maple-wood clapper. His signal rang out clear and resonant, sometimes drawing nearer, sometimes fading into the distance so that one could tell exactly whereabouts in the village he was at any moment.

On any other night Blishchuk would have called out to the old man, just to remind him that his chairman was wide awake. But this time he waited, his heart beating madly, for the sound of the clapper to grow faint. He walked slowly past the sleeping cottages, the dogs

letting him go by in silence, but when he reached his own gate he turned his head away and walked on.

Behind the drawn curtains in the dark stuffy parlour his wife lay sighing; the sleepless crickets chirruped with as many modulations as a policeman's whistle.

From time to time Blishchuk stopped: perhaps everything that had happened that night was a bad dream which would vanish if he were to shake his head....

But then he would grind his teeth and clench his fists and tell himself, "No, no, it's no dream, it *has* happened."

This is what had happened at Bolshany a few hours before.

On the fluffy flannel cloth on the table in the kolkhoz office two kerosene lamps burned hotly. People sat so quietly in that overcrowded room that you could hear their tense breathing. Near the table, in the front row, two downcast-looking peasants in wadded coats sat sighing: Anton Semenchuk, chairman of the auditing committee, and a member of the board named Ivan Semenchuk (they were not related, just namesakes). The milkmaid Maximovna, a white shawl over her shoulders, had her work-worn hands folded severely in her lap. People stood shoulder to shoulder at the door, holding their breath. Even on the porch they could hear Klyucharev's voice on that still August night:

"Comrade Blishchuk has got so high and mighty that he even turns kolkhoz women out of the lorry he's riding in himself and says, 'This is for me.' Hearing him you wouldn't think the Soviets had ever come to Bolshany—you'd think he did everything himself: distributed the land, gave the grain, provided the tractors. He played on people's eagerness to work hard so as to live happier lives. Oh yes, the kolkhozes in this district have become stronger and richer. The working class sends us machines. But what use do we make of them? Blishchuk's tip-

sy head has no time to think about the best way of arranging work. He's made a lot on the flax, boozed all the bonus and is sitting tight because he thinks that by making a splash he's protected himself from criticism. But meanwhile the hay rots, the oats stand unreaped and no vegetables have been delivered. He has fulfilled his plan for cattle-breeding, overfulfilled it, in fact, but what about the milk? And why should our workers have to do without fresh vegetables in summer, why, I ask you, comrades? Why, just because of Blishchuk and his sort, should they have to be short of meat and butter? What are we thinking about, breaking the Leninist union of workers and peasants? After all, the workers are sending us tractors and manufactured goods all the time."

Blishchuk sat with his head hanging. His matted hair drooped from his temples, his dimmed eyes expressed such profound melancholy that people averted their eyes to avoid looking at him. Only Klava Borvinka, the accountant, who sat with red cheeks over the minutes, could not tear her dark frightened eyes off the chairman. It was as if, accustomed to obeying and trusting him implicitly, she had suddenly felt ground giving way under her feet. From time to time Blishchuk muttered in a strained voice, "That's not true. It wasn't that way."

He still occupied the chairman's seat at the red-cloth-covered table, but now he was isolated and useless; the kolkhoz business was settled over his head.

"You know how it used to be? No one said a word, they all kept quiet even though they saw things were going wrong. Aye, and now too they're not speaking out fully, everyone's thinking: the wolf's been killed but his skin's still whole."

Anton Semenchuk, his face purple from the stuffy atmosphere in the room, hauled himself out of his chair with an effort and seemed to take up half the room with his broad shoulders.

"Now, I'm chairman of the auditing committee. I haven't enough education, Comrade secretary. I can't check all the papers. That means we ought to call the board together more often. The Party organization ought to watch things better too. I'd like to see the time when the whole bookkeeping department will prick up their ears, as an ordinary collective farmer comes into the room, thinking he'd come in to check their figures. We've got four drivers on our books, they cost us twenty thousand on fuel alone, and all they do is driving Blishchuk home or to Glubin. I just can't bear to see that. He's chosen the sort of team-leaders who say, 'Oh, as long as Blishchuk stays, we stay too.' And if any of them dares say a word against him—well, let Pavlyuk Chikailo, leader of the first team, tell you how Blishchuk himself dictated to him an application to be relieved of work."

Chikailo, a young full-cheeked fellow who was standing against the wall, his hands crossed over his stomach, nodded his head. He looked at the speaker with unblinking eyes, his mouth gaped in his excitement.

"Grudik, Blishchuk's second-in-command, knew more than any of us but he kept quiet and put up with him. 'Twas only yesterday that he came and threw down his papers and said he wasn't going on with the job. The figures were faked. And what the hell's the use of faked accounts? According to the reports we were on the upgrade, but if you measured the harvest you got another picture. And that's been going on here, in Bolshany. Why, we could be the best farm in the republic! There are some wonderful folk here, Comrade secretary. Tell 'em to bail the water out of the lake, they'll do it, they wouldn't shirk."

The gathering confirmed these words with a loud murmur.

"So the kolkhoz won't collapse without Blishchuk?" asked Klyucharev, mopping his brow.

"Collapse? Why, it's our work keeps it going."

"What have you to say, Blishchuk?"

"I don't know what more I could do," Blishchuk said dejectedly, his fingers playing nervously with a dead cigarette-end. "I've thought and thought of how to do things best, I don't sleep nights."

Klyucharev raised his hand impatiently but put it down at once. He'd heard all this before. But why shouldn't the others hear it?

"I've been chairman here five years," said Blishchuk uneasily. "My health's bad, I haven't had a holiday.... Five years ago every cottage in Bolshany had a thatched roof. Well, everybody knows what I've made of the place since then."

Several faces darkened, some people looked aside. For a few seconds the issue seemed to be hanging in the balance.

"How about your mistakes?" Klyucharev felt cold with the excitement of the struggle.

Blishchuk answered in a sad quiet voice, his eyes distant:

"I've made some very big mistakes. First, I controlled the work weakly. Second, I wasn't given advice...."

"No, those weren't your mistakes. You're wrong. Your mistake was that you substituted yourself for the kolkhoz, Comrade Blishchuk. That's led people bigger than you astray. Call yourself a leader? Why, you make a profit with one hand and fritter it away with the other! Why d'you think we keep a herd of cattle? For the collective farmers. That's something they don't realize yet, but what did you do to explain it to them? They think the kolkhoz keeps cows only to be able to deliver milk to the state. And with the amount of milk you get from them it can't be otherwise. But you don't care a damn about the milk yield. You stake everything on flax. You let the rest run through your fingers like water. What about

that blind eye you've turned to the cutting of hay out of the kolkhoz pastures? How much of it's been taken? Twenty hectares?"

"Oh no! I gave permission for four."

"And they cut twenty."

"Thirty," said Grudik, quietly, candidly, turning his dark tormented eyes aside.

"Who cut it?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" drawled Maximovna. "Well, we do. Anyone who takes him into the tea-house and treats him to half a litre of vodka. It's criminal."

Again there was a sharp break in the tense silence of the gathering. Blishchuk kept his eyes glued on the table-cloth, an unlighted cigarette dangling from his calloused fingers. Klava bit her lips and dropped her pencil. Klyucharev waited for the faint stir to die down, then rose to his feet and took a deep breath of bitter, stale air.

"I think everything is quite clear, comrades. Who is in favour of Grudik being put in temporary charge of the kolkhoz—to work honestly and properly as the Party teaches? Who is for Grudik?"

Grudik took in the room with a glance of warm gratitude, but when his eyes stumbled against Blishchuk's figure he dropped them with a guilty look.

"I propose Anton Semenchuk as his assistant," said Maximovna, her hand chopping the air.

"What about Klava Borvinka?"

"She can stay. She's a good girl," Semenchuk said and the room supported him, taking mercy on the girl.

Blishchuk was reluctant to surrender his seal of office. Almost all had left the room but he went on sitting in his chairman's place, his hands gripping the edge of the table. His face expressed utter bewilderment; he had,

it seemed, only one thought in his mind: around him in ruins lay the life he had long grown accustomed to, the life of a manager subordinate to no one ("Klyucharev is master there, and I'm master here"), the bonus-winning head of a famous kolkhoz. If he let that round seal leave his hand, if he rose from the table, all would be over—he'll never come back.

The minutes passed, almost tangibly, and with them all hope faded. If he could only think of something to do, something to say....

"You see what I could do in a fortnight.... Just tell me what to do and I'll do it this very day...."

He knew his words were pointless, he didn't believe them himself.

Borvinka, still biting her lips, wrote out the statement of replacement. Blishchuk read it word by word, stumbling over the phrases, taking as much time over it as he could, and then, taking the plunge, signed it.

No one noticed how he got up and went out. But later on Klava Borvinka said that he had stood for a long time under the open window, raising the edge of the white curtain.

"Well, that's that," said Klyucharev in a weary voice and got up. "In a few days' time we'll convene a general meeting and elect a proper chairman."

He looked round at those who were left in the room: both the Semenchuks, the Party organizer, Klava Borvinka and Grudik. Clouds of tobacco smoke curled slowly out of the windows. The recently appointed procurator, not long out of college, whom Klyucharev was driving round the district, was leafing attentively through the papers in the file Blishchuk had left on the table. Still full of the novelty and importance of his post, he alternately frowned and chuckled as if to say with his whole expression: now that I've taken this in hand everything will be different.

"I shall have to find out whether or not there are grounds for legal action," he said.

"Find it out. That's your right."

The young procurator felt that Klyucharev was displeased with something, perhaps even with him; he looked at him with a question in his eyes. His young face reflected every thought in his mind so clearly that Klyucharev could not help smiling, though it was a wry smile.

"We've lost a man under our very eyes, that's the trouble, Comrade Procurator."

4

There was no word Klyucharev hated so much as formalism but now he felt that the word applied to him.

In a formal sense he was in the right. He could answer for everything he had done. There was a sense and purpose even in what Pinchuk took to be his indecision and procrastination.

"It's quite clear to us that Blishchuk's played out and that he's dragging the kolkhoz back. But if we remove him now we're likely to lose the trust of the folk at Bolshany. When Communists decide something they have to make sure their decision is well based and that everyone understands it. It's not enough to be able to produce figures showing where Blishchuk's taking the kolkhoz, we've got to be able to show up the profoundly harmful nature of Blishchuk's ways of doing things. We've got to have the collective farmers themselves feel their strength, their own—not Blishchuk's." Thus had Klyucharev spoken at the Party bureau meeting, and his words had even gone into the minutes. Besides that, no one could accuse him of kowtowing to his superiors. He

had acted against the wishes of the regional executive committee which, for prestige reasons, wanted at all costs to hush up the Blishchuk affair.

Why, even that morning, when Klyucharev was preparing to leave for Bolshany, he had heard praise of the Liberation kolkhoz in the Glubin District—Blishchuk's place—coming through the crackling and howling from the region centre.

Someone was talking about flax and a prospective profit of two million rubles; then he had gone on to list the number of lorries, head of cattle, poultry.... Klyucharev recalled that "chicken farm" and caught himself thinking in involuntary surprise: "See how pretty it sounds on the air!"

A statement by Blishchuk was broadcast too: "Our task is not only to raise the crop but to gather it and process it." Klyucharev could hardly hear for the noise but one phrase came flaring up: "At our kolkhoz it is always so...." And although the announcer read in a flat, monotonous voice, behind his words Klyucharev could see Blishchuk with his pale, washed-out eyes and his cunning complacent face.

Dawn was not far off when Klyucharev and the young procurator at last went to bed in the parlour of Anton Semenchuk's house. The house was new, spacious, quiet. Beyond the uncurtained windows the summer constellations shone in the sky. But for a few rustles of the night all was silent.

The procurator tossed impatiently, afraid of letting slip the suitable moment for opening a conversation. He sensed that Klyucharev was not asleep and when he heard him reach for his tunic, which was hanging on the back of a chair, he asked him hastily, readily:

"Looking for matches? I've got some."

The day's events had left the procurator full of impressions, and now they seemed more important and more vivid than the sum total of everything that had happened in his life before. The little district of Glubin—such a nice little spot on the map of the U.S.S.R.—had suddenly revealed itself to be a whole world of its own, and he was overjoyed that he had discovered this world and, moreover, become a part of it. He had felt flattered when at the meeting that evening people had listened to him with almost as close attention as to Klyucharev. "Please don't get the impression that someone has dug a pit for Blishchuk to fall in," he had said, "especially as there are some who have a few personal scores to pay off—you know what I'm referring to. The thing is that he was heading the kolkhoz in the wrong direction. People ought to have a clear conception of the kind of state they are living in and of what its laws are."

Throughout the evening he had watched Klyucharev with admiration. In everything the district Party secretary did there was so much personal conviction that when he began to get worked up and stumbled over his words people seemed to understand him better than ever.

Of course, the procurator reflected, only a passionate belief in the rightness of his cause gives a man the power of influencing others. . . . Strange to think of such a man looking funny at times, evoking commiseration or making serious mistakes. . . .

"That went very well, Fyodor Adrianovich. I mean the meeting," said the procurator. "They got Blishchuk taped, his demagogic phrases did not help him this time. It's clear to all what sort of man he is."

"Clear? To all? I don't think so."

Klyucharev thrust his hands behind his head. He had a feeling almost of physical pain when he recalled Blishchuk's downcast face, his dull eyes. One had only to

think back a year to recall Blishchuk, the renowned chairman of the first millionaire kolkhoz in the region, a man who looked calmly, eyes slightly narrowed, into the future—from the cover of a magazine.

Where was the rotten step which had given under Blishchuk and brought him down? When had the wave begun to fall? And how could they all, and in the first place he, Klyucharev, fail to have noticed that moment and overlook it so that things should have come to this?

“Whatever merits he had in the past,” said the young procurator, relishing his own inexorability, “today Blishchuk does not measure up to the growing demands of our times, and as one who is responsible for the whole kolkhoz—”

“For the man too.”

“What did you say?”

“For each man too.”

The procurator cleared his throat.

“To be frank,” said Klyucharev, “this has been a rotten day. A specially bad one for us, for the district Party committee.”

“But why? If a man’s not up to his job—”

“Oh, it’s very easy to stick a label on someone.” Klyucharev raised himself suddenly on one elbow. “‘Not up to his job.’ But isn’t the whole system of loading people with praise as much to blame as the man himself? A man does something useful, notice is taken of it and he’s rewarded—that’s enough, isn’t it? But what is it like with us as often as not: a man’s praised for something, rightly so, and from then on everything goes by its own impetus: that man sits in all presidiums, he’s written about in the papers, sent as a delegate to conferences, elected a deputy to the district executive committee. Little by little people grow accustomed to his name, like they do to an easy-chair. He’s on a handy list of names—why, wake me up at night and I’ll reel the list off to you without

✓a single mistake. But after all there's a living man behind every famous name. And that living man is only human. Yet how can one criticize and correct a fellow who has been pushed up the ladder by oneself? By doing so you'd be casting a shadow on yourself. So what happens is that people find it more convenient to shut their eyes to things that are wrong."

In his agitation Klyucharev tossed a broken match aside and neglecting to strike another peered aimlessly at the vague outline of a sheet of white paper pinned to the wall. "What is it? A poster? No. It isn't the right shape."

"But surely you don't hold Blishchiuk free from blame altogether?" The procurator sounded aggrieved. Only an hour before everything had seemed to fit so nicely into place: the pompous chairman, the vigilant secretary....

"No. I don't. He paid for his mistakes today. Where Blishchuk went wrong was that he didn't understand the principle of the Soviet system, he thought he could rest all his life on easily won laurels. He got a million for his flax, but the two million he could have got from stock-raising and the vegetables and grain he left lying in the earth. No one has the right to forgive him that."

The summer constellations moved round the sky like watch hands. He who knows how to read them has no need to ask the time: the white dawn will come to his window earlier than to others.

The heavy dew weighed down to the ground the branches of the pear-tree. The procurator fell asleep in the middle of a phrase—the sleep of youth that wipes the memory clean.

The night watchman's clapper sounded for the last time and died away. Klyucharev opened his sticky eyelids with difficulty: it was his own picture that looked at him from an election poster on the wall.

The Blishchuk affair took up several days of Klyucharev's time and made him put aside his other cares. But his thoughts dwelled constantly on Antonina although what he had been told about her beehives cast an unpleasant shadow upon the feelings he secretly cherished for her. It was on Grom that he vented this undercurrent of discontent: when he spoke to him on the telephone about the hospital his tone was sharp; however, he did not say everything he felt on the subject, telling himself that such matters were best dealt with on the spot.

On the eve of his trip to Luchesy Kiyucharev rang up Pavel Gorban at the district Komsomol office. He had not forgotten that he had promised Pavel this trip the day they discussed the wedding.

"D'you remember what we were saying about the Stundists?" he asked. "Here's a trump card for your propaganda: yesterday some of the Bolshany lads caught Presbyter Stepan Lisyansky with a girl in the bushes. It was dark and he could probably have got away but he fought like mad, trying to keep his face hidden so they wouldn't recognize him. Today there's been a whole string of Stundists calling at the village soviet and asking whether the story is true or not. They've had more than enough of that false saint. That fact's more use to you than any lecture."

"Oh yes, of course," replied Pavel in his customary flat voice.

Klyucharev felt so vexed that he groaned: was there nothing that would stir Gorban up? He was such a good fellow with that honest, open face under a mop of curly hair.

Klyucharev divided people into two lots: one lot, the largest, consisted of those who opened their hearts to him. He liked their good qualities and was not worried about

their bad ones. In the other lot were those who slipped away from you before you could delve to their core.

By about noon next day Klyucharev and Pavel had already visited Pyatigostichi and were on their way from there to a Komsomol meeting at Luchesy.

At a place where the road forked—one way led to Bolshany, the other to Luchesy—Klyucharev signalled to the driver to draw to the edge of the road and stop. The roadside grass with cornflowers growing among it was so high that it brushed the dust off the headlight. On a little hilly field a combine stood. It had not reaped more than a hectare, and as the wheat lay bent by the rains many spikes were unreaped among the stubble. The combine-driver and his mate sat near by under a broom bush, smoking. A little way off a girl agronomist lay dozing, her face protected against the sun by a handkerchief. A tranquil silence reigned over the scene.

"What's wrong here?" Klyucharev called as he came up. "Why isn't the combine working?"

"Breakdown," said the driver indifferently, rising and blowing his hair out of his eyes.

Pavel Gorban, coming up behind, greeted the men.

"Why did you bring your combine to this mite of a field?" asked Klyucharev, still fairly calm. "Just to give folk something to laugh at? This field would be better reaped with the sickle."

"The chairman's a greedy-guts," the man said scornfully. "One combine wasn't enough for him, so he asked for a second. And there's nothing for it to do. No room for it." And as though disclaiming all further responsibility he waved his hands broadly. "Anyway, here he is himself: he smelled that the chief is about."

Sure enough, hurrying across the field towards them was Grom, the chairman of the Luchesy kolkhoz.

Since speaking to him on the telephone a week before Klyucharev had not seen Grom. All his old sense of ir-

ritation surged in him and he advanced towards the chairman with an expression on his face that boded no good.

Pavel made a few steps after him but hesitated, changed his mind and turned to the combine.

“What’s wrong with it?”

The driver gave a surly shrug.

“The devil alone knows. Something with the ignition. I’m not a repair shop. I’ve sent a message to the MTS; they’ll send someone to fix it.”

Whistling faintly through his teeth the man strolled across the field watching Klyucharev with interest out of the corner of an eye. Pavel walked round the combine, inspecting it. Then he swung the starting handle: the engine did not spark. “I see,” he muttered under his breath. He lifted the top of the distributor.

“Have you a thin file?” he shouted to the driver.

The man shook his head. He did not even turn round.

Klyucharev meanwhile was pacing the length of the section of the field that had been cut. He strode so fast that Grom could hardly keep up with him. The agronomist, a pair of white gym shoes on her unstockinged feet, followed them almost at a run.

“Why are you torturing that machine, Grom? Have you forgotten the amount of hard work that went into making it? What’s the sense of using it on a tiny patch of land like this? It’s like sending a clever useful man to scoop water with a sieve.” Then, turning to the agronomist, Klyucharev said: “You’d have done better to wait till they’d stacked a bit before taking a nap in the sun—you would find a bit of shade then, and you wouldn’t be for everyone to see and marvel at. No, Danila Semyonovich”—turning back to Grom—“as long as I stay in this district I’ll not forgive you this field of wheat.”

“Fyodor Adrianovich!” Pavel shouted from the combine. “Have you got a coin on you?”

Sweat was pouring down his temples, his cheeks were smeared with fresh oil stains. But his face was alight with a keen, almost happy expression. Klyucharev had never seen Pavel Gorban like this. He silently reached into his pocket and drew out a fistful of small coins. Pavel examined them all, selected a new one, tried its edge with a finger-nail, then with a laugh and a shake of the head said:

“We'll fix it all right. Don't you worry, driver.”

“So it's the contact needs cleaning, is it?” the driver muttered, avoiding Klyucharev's eyes.

“What it means is that besides a certificate that you've completed your courses you need a bit of sense in your head,” Klyucharev said. “We'll drive to the village soviet, Pavel, and ring up the MTS, tell 'em not to bother to send a breakdown gang.”

They went on to the car. Pavel Gorban did not say anything for a while. He kept looking back anxiously. The combine-driver sprang up to his seat as though carried by the wind, shouted something to his mate, and the huge machine moved on, tossing aside the ripe wheat. The air was filled with an odour of field flowers, seeds of wild herbs flew into the car; one fluffy ball stuck to Pavel's oil-stained cheek.

“Well, well,” Klyucharev drawled vaguely, “mechanizers indeed....”

Pavel responded readily to the touch of irony in his voice.

“How can they do such things?” he exclaimed with indignation. “They give a man a first-class new machine and he doesn't care a damn whether it runs or doesn't. If a fellow doesn't feel it's his job, if he doesn't like the work, then why on earth does he do it?” His big liquid eyes glittered with anger. Even his voice had grown sharper.

"I didn't know you understood anything about machinery. I thought you were a Komsomol official by vocation."

"No, I'm a tractor-driver." Pavel looked regretfully at his hands. "I was too young for the army when the war began. I was evacuated to the Volga country. They gave us youngsters the tractors to look after. We had to learn to drive them and plough the fields—all at once. Incidentally, we had few breakdowns, though we had no instructors those days, and no inspectors either. We used to have the German bombers over during the day-time so we ploughed at night. It'd be dark all round with the glare of Stalingrad burning on the horizon—made you feel you were alone in the world, just you and your tractor—used to talk to it, sing songs to it...."

Pavel talked in a calm, almost dreamy voice, his good-natured eyes looking back towards the difficult days of his youth.

Yes, thought Klyucharev suddenly, I was right—he is a likeable fellow.

"Listen, Pavel," he said aloud, "why don't you go back to your old job? You're fond of machines. You could go and work at the MTS. Or don't you want to give up your office desk? Why, it's not too late for you to go to technical college."

"Fyodor Adrianovich!" Pavel cried in sudden desperation. "You shouldn't say things like that. Of course I'd like to go back to it."

Klyucharev frowned.

On the face of it Pavel Gorban's path through life looked straight and natural: it might even be described as an example of the way a man goes.

When he was doing his term in the army he was elected the Komsomol organizer in his company, then bureau secretary. He fulfilled his duties with the painstaking conscientiousness that he applied to all his work. His

demob papers described him as an excellent worker and when he showed them to people at the regional Komso-mol committee they looked delighted and said:

"Fine, you're just the sort we need."

His timid objections were brushed aside.

"Dear comrade," he was told dryly in the personnel department as if he were a little lisping boy, "do you think that's so important? Haven't you heard of Komso-mol discipline?"

As Klyucharev listened to this tale his fingers drummed impatiently on his knees. "Well, what happened then?" he asked.

"As you see," said Pavel with a wry smile. "I attended a year's course at a political school. And now I go on being moved from district to district."

Klyucharev, recollecting that he himself had often said that he needed quite a different type of Komsomol organizer at Glubin, averted his eyes and said nothing.

The Luchesy village soviet, where meetings were generally held, stood some way outside the village, near the road. They found it empty and silent, although the Komsomol members were supposed to have gathered there a full hour before.

Klyucharev and Pavel walked round the building, looking through the windows and hammering on them until a bushy head appeared. No, they were told, no one had been there. Dmitro Myshniak? Why, he must be at home.

They drove on down a narrow lane and then turned straight off across a bumpy green. The car stepped from mound to mound gingerly with its four wheels, almost like a living creature.

When they reached Myshniak's cottage the door was opened to them by his mother, an old woman in a white home-spun skirt with a leather jerkin over her shoulders. Dmitro took a long time to pull on his boots in a dark little room, then appeared and lit a tin lamp shaped

like a small nutshell. Out of the gloom sprang an icon-case hung with embroidered towels, a calendar with a coloured picture on it, shaggy potted plants on the low window-sills.

Sleepy-eyed Myshniak did not appear to recognize Klyucharev in the half-light; Pavel stepped forward and sat down beside him on a bench where a guitar lay. "So he plays the guitar, too," the thought flashed through Klyucharev's mind.

"Did you cancel the meeting?" asked Pavel, shoving aside the guitar. Its strings twanged plaintively.

"Aye, cancelled it," said Myshniak, his eyes on the floor at his feet.

"And you cancelled the one last Sunday too," said Pavel in a serenely abstract tone of voice. "Little by little they'll get accustomed to not turning up at all. You won't have any sort of organization then, just so many individual members. You'll find yourself talking to each of 'em separately. No general meetings at all.... How's the fodder situation here?" he went on after a while.

"Good."

"How much hay have you cut?"

Myshniak told him.

"But you haven't got any Komsomol groups in the working teams yet, have you? We talked about that, Dmitro, remember?"

"I remember," Myshniak said reluctantly.

From the moment Pavel had begun questioning him Myshniak's face had assumed that downcast, guilty look that Pavel himself wore that day in the district Komsomol committee.

"Why, it's a vicious circle," Klyucharev thought to himself involuntarily. "I go for Pavel, Pavel goes for Myshniak, Myshniak goes for his Komsomol members...."

He slipped out of the cottage unnoticed, sat in the car and sounded the horn: the sooner that conversation was over, the better.

However, he did not feel the slightest irritation towards Pavel: both Komsomol and Party work required more than honesty and effort, it required talent. Without talent a man was stumbling like a blindman from directive to directive and gradually got into the habit of thinking in terms of written instructions, seeing not people but the forms they filled in. . . .

"Oh no, Pavel, that won't happen to you. I'll see it doesn't," he promised himself with sudden determination.

6

It was already quite dark when Klyucharev got around to the last business he had in Luchesy: a talk with Antonina Andreyevna about those damned beehives. He left the car at the village soviet and took a short cut across a field full of hummocks from which a grey mist was rising. He walked easily, without stumbling, breathing deeply and happily. A man is not too old for such nights at thirty-seven.

He had a sudden surprising consciousness of the vastness of the world. The glow of the rising moon lit the sky over the distant forest like a bonfire.

Klyucharev was experiencing one of those moments when a man wants to get away from his everyday work, take a good hard look at his own life and think things over. He had lived in Glubin for five years, he knew every road, every farmstead in the district. There was not a cottage to which he could not have turned in a moment of difficulty. But there were times, like that night at Bolshany which he and Blishchuk alike had spent in bitter sleeplessness, or this one, after his talk with Pa-

vel, when he longed to hear beside him someone's friendly wise voice and feel the arm of an older comrade.

When he visited the region centre his superiors were kind and a little envious ("The best district. I wonder how he does it?"), and often his complaints would be dismissed with a wave of the arm and "Oh, you can swallow all your troubles with a mouthful of bread."

He found himself thinking more and more frequently of Lobko: even that funny little ditty of his, "The nightingale," now roused in him a belated feeling of warm gratitude.

It had begun to drizzle when he reached the hospital. The rain fell without a sound, without the faintest rustle; the trees and the grass held out their dusty leaves thirstily for the heavy quicksilver drops.

"Am I too late?" he asked as he crossed the threshold.

"No, it doesn't matter," said Antonina with reserve.

He slipped into a hospital gown and tiptoed through the wards. Antonina walked ahead with a lamp and in its flickering light the clear-cut line of her nose, brow and chin looked as though they had been cast in bronze. "She has tanned," thought Klyucharev.

"It must be painful for him to walk on tiptoe with that bad leg of his," Antonina was thinking.

Klyucharev looked to see whether there was any dust on the white-painted instrument cupboards. Then they went into the kitchen: aluminium pans covered with cheese-cloth, a cooking spoon hanging from a nail—everything was cosy and homely.

Klyucharev suddenly recalled that he had eaten nothing since the morning.

"Could you make me a cup of tea, Antonina Andreyevna?" he asked in a guilty whisper, looking round like a conspirator. "Don't worry, I'm not going to eat any of your hospital stores, all I want is some tea."

Unsmilingly she filled the kettle and pushed a few pieces of firewood into the stove. Klyucharev squatted on his haunches and chopped some splinters for kindling. Perhaps his hands were longing to do simple household chores like this—he had quite got out of the habit—or perhaps every man needs a short spell of silence after an anxious day's work.... All that could be heard for some time was the birch bark crackling into flame and the grass whispering and rustling outside the open window.... Antonina scooped some well water out of a bucket and poured it over his hands. They shared a towel.

“That's a sign that we're going to quarrel,” he said slyly.

Antonina shrugged her shoulders slightly.

“Well, let's have some tea.”

She had not been particularly pleased to see him and didn't conceal the fact, behaving with a certain amount of reserve, though in her heart of hearts she told herself that that was not a fair way to treat a man like Klyucharev. Her pride and sensitiveness did not permit her to behave with natural friendliness, perhaps because he was as much her chief as anyone else's.

“What delicious honey!” he said, turning the teaspoon, and his face suddenly clouded.

Antonina did not notice the change of expression. She suddenly smiled, the first time that evening.

“You really think so?” she asked and sat down near him. Her face was transformed as though an inner lamp had been turned on and, for all his uneasiness, Klyucharev could not tear his eyes away from her.

“Try a little of this kind, and then some of that,” she said. With animation she set five glass jars of honey in a row—each numbered according to the hive—and Klyucharev disconsolately tasted them all.

“D'you notice the difference in flavour? Come on, take some more and get a good taste of it.”

She was so eager to have his opinion that Klyucharev tried to answer her in all seriousness.

"No, I can't tell the difference. It's all good honey."

Rather solemnly she went back to her place opposite him and sat with her chin cupped in her hands.

"Incidentally, it's not ordinary honey: I've just treated you for five illnesses at once."

In her present unusual mood of cheerfulness she explained in detail one of the ideas of her teacher: that by feeding bees with medicinal syrups, say valerian, you get a honey which possesses the properties of the respective drug.

"That's what I've done, you see. I meant to write to Vitaly Nikodimovich about it but first I had to try it out on someone because I've eaten so much honey I can't distinguish the flavours any more—I don't like sweet things, anyway. Just think how important it would be if we could experiment on a bigger scale and then start producing honey in quantity. Specially important for children. . . . But why are you looking at me like that?"

"Oh, Antonina Andreyevna, why can't you find a medicine to cure stupidity and meanness? No, it's nothing. . . . Go on, please, tell me more. So I was your guinea-pig just now, was I? You *are* a dangerous person, I must say." He laughed heartily and feeling greatly relieved went over to the open window.

Warm rain was pattering in the darkness; the night air was intoxicatingly sweet with the scent of flowers and damp grass. Klyucharev smiled at the darkness and filled his lungs with deep breaths as though he were discovering for the first time how much happiness a man could get simply from breathing.

"Don't you think our Polesie is a fine place, Antonina Andreyevna?" he said abruptly. "Or do you find life boring here? Are you like the others who work out their obligatory three years here and then go back to the city

with its theatres and shops, and jazz in the parks in the evenings?"

"No, I am not like that," Antonina said slowly. "Talking of music, Fyodor Adrianovich, how is it we haven't a single real choir in the whole district? People sing so well here. Take Serafima Ptitsa, for instance. Have you ever heard her sing?"

"Well, I never!" Klyucharev threw his hands apart comically. "You too! The other day I met Bukhovtsev, the secretary of the Party committee over at Ozersk—you know, the most miserable district in the region. We met on the borders of our districts, like a couple of sovereign princes, and had a smoke. He was grumbling that we get all the praise and he gets all the curses even when we're both equally in the wrong. One of his chiefs came to see him not long ago and complained that Bukhovtsev thought of nothing but agriculture. What about the rest? What about ideological work, education? Where were his amateur talent groups, readers' conferences? Try and make a splash with *something*, he said. But Bukhovtsev's a proud fellow, he's not looking for fame, he doesn't want to sew a new patch on an old pair of trousers, if you'll excuse the local expression."

"But it's not like that in our district," Antonina protested, arching her brows proudly.

"Maybe it isn't, now. But we too had to start with grain and hay and potatoes. After that you can have your readers' conferences. Certainly, they're very interesting."

Klyucharev carefully lowered the gauze curtain against the night and returned to his chair at the table.

"I feel so fine, so happy just now that I think I'm going to live another hundred years and see our district become the best in the whole Soviet Union ... and—Well, all kinds of fine thoughts. Could that be the result of your honey, d'you think? It's fine that you've turned out to be like this."

"Like what?"

"Oh, just like this, Antonina Andreyevna. Why, if I hadn't dropped in on you this evening we might have gone on living side by side another ten years and you'd have gone on thinking of me as that bureaucrat at the district committee and I'd have gone on thinking of you as that individualist doctor at Luchesy."

They sat opposite each other oblivious of the passage of time. What a wonderful feeling—to rejoice in a man, a man one respects! Even now there were things in Klyucharev that Antonina did not like, but she looked deep into his being, as if his heart were exposed to her gaze; and at the same time like any woman she felt herself to be older than him, his hostess for that evening, and she did not forget to pile his plate with sandwiches and to refill his teacup. . . .

"Five years ago I walked from cottage to cottage here in Luchesy and sat for hours and hours trying to convince people. One day I could not contain myself and I swore at one demobbed serviceman, 'We fought together the whole war and now I have to argue with you about the kolkhoz!' He didn't say a word but looked thoughtful. An hour later he found me and handed me his application form. Not far away from here a war widow signed a form and then ran outside and yelled at the top of her voice, 'Oh dear, they've made me join the kolkhoz!' It was a dark quiet night. I told her, 'Tear up your application but don't howl.' But she went on shrieking. A year later she told me she'd been afraid of bandits. 'But how could I live without the kolkhoz?' That was why she didn't tear up her application that time.

"We organized the kolkhoz, elected a chairman and team-leaders. I went away—the kolkhoz collapsed; those were uneasy times, people were waiting to see what was going to happen, they were afraid. That repeated three times. Then there was another headache. There

was no seed and the state wasn't in a position to help us at that time. That meant I had to find words that would really touch people's hearts.

"Listen," I said, "I went to the front, I fought the whole war through, beginning in the ranks and finishing as a captain. I was wounded, got concussion. Then I was sent here, to Polesie, to help you start living the Soviet way. Do you think I am doing all that for myself? Do you think it's for me? So I've come to you—a Russian talking to Russians—to tell you I haven't got any grain. And I want to work but I've got into trouble and there's just no grain to be had anywhere. Surely you'll help me out with a handful? You, Auntie, wouldn't you find some for me?" That woman fidgeted and smiled, "Of course, I'd let you have some." "And you, Granny?" "I'd give you some too," she replied sternly. "Well, take it that it's for me, please. So you'll give me a kilogram of grain, Auntie?" "Yes." "And you?" "Yes." We drew up a list, collected the grain and sowed it the next morning."

Antonina studied him hard. Her hands were clasped tightly.

"You've had a hard time."

"Hard?" Klyucharev replied harshly. "I was sent here, not invited, hard or easy. Had to work, that's all."

He wiped his face with the palm of his hand: a moth, its wings singed on the lamp glass, had flown against his forehead.

"You're a proud man," said Antonina softly, "that's what I like in you."

"No, you don't like me. Neither for my pride nor for my obedience," said Klyucharev suddenly, his face colouring deeply.

Antonina sat stock-still. Her hands rested on her knees. For a few seconds Klyucharev looked at those untroubled hands, tightly bound at the wrist with the tapes of her doctor's smock. Then he slowly raised his head.

"Perhaps you thought—" he said with a strained smile.

She shook her head.

"I didn't think anything, Fyodor Adrianovich. Let's forget about that." She was the first to get up from the table and started putting away the crockery.

CHAPTER SIX

SERAFIMA SINGS

1

Kostya Sosnin, that tousle-headed dark-eyed student of philosophy with the blue University badge on the lapel of his town suit, who had at first expressed himself so scornfully on the subject of Glubin roads, threatening to go into Klyucharev's office carrying a pilgrim's staff, was now, a little more than a month later, to be seen—sunburned, wearing an old coarse cloth military tunic, stumping through his splendid, freshly painted school. The whole place smelled of drying oil. There was something wonderfully bracing and inspiring about that astringent smell.

They did not have so much paint to go and the painter was not so good, but they wanted to make the best of it. And so a whole pack of people was present—the headmaster, the supply manager and two or three other enthusiasts of whom one, a young fellow from the collective-farm radio station, kept his ears cocked for the sounds of his little broadcasting station (and when they ceased, dashed across the road to the management office).

The enthusiasts went dreamy-eyed from room to room picking their way carefully through the plaster on the

floor, pushing past piles of desks stacked one on top of the other, stopping here and there in delight, gingerly feeling the sticky walls with their fingers and dreaming aloud:

“What about blue for this room? Could you manage it?”

The painter, enjoying his importance, scratched his scrubby cheeks.

“Blue? Yes, I could manage that. But I couldn’t stencil it.”

“What if we had a plain diamond pattern? The background lighter, with the diamonds a bit darker. Along all the panels, eh?”

Three inspired pairs of hands traced patterns on the smeared wall.

The school was built on a bluff and stood up prominently from whichever direction you looked at it. It was a school that many a town would have been glad to possess: a two-storey building with lilac lettering on the pediment, roofed with light-coloured slates. Before it was built the church belfry had served as the landmark for the inhabitants of the five villages around; now they would say:

“Bratichi? There it is. See that white school?”

There were seventeen windows on the façade. In the morning, when they reflected the rising sun, the window-panes glowed like a mass of waving red flags. It was a real joy to go to a school like that through the fields of stubble, swinging a full satchel as you walked, a joy to run around it until the first bell rang.

At the back, flowers grew lush and dense up against a protecting wall. There was a whiff of camphor in the spicy, bitter scent of the autumn blossoms. Here grew pink and purple hollyhocks taller than man, and orange marigolds. But the headmaster, Sosnin, was not at all pleased with this way of using the school territory. He

was frowning as he took Zhenya Vdovina round his domain soon after her arrival from Glubin.

"Next spring we'll have a young naturalists' corner here—a section called 'Through Byelorussia.' We'll plant samples of all the herbs, cereals and flowers that grow in our republic. There are so many useful things that have been half-forgotten in Polesie. I suppose you've seen the home-woven bedspreads they make in these parts. They dye them with nettle juice, yes, ordinary nettles, and they give such a bright, wonderfully green colour."

Zhenya and Kostya had made each other's acquaintance through Vasily Moroz at a teachers' conference which Zhenya, being in Glubin at the time, had attended.

By that time she had grown to feel quite at home in the district. Glubin was for her no more than a transit point. She would return there from Grabun or from some other remote spot in the forest, travelling in the company of cranberry pickers and spending the whole day in the back of a lorry, up to her knees in the ruddy, firm berries. She no longer felt dependent on the chiefs' cars or jeeps; she simply sat on the porch of the district executive committee offices, in the Glubin square where all five country roads converged, and waited for a lorry. Many of the drivers knew her by sight and would shout from the wheel:

"Like to ride with us to Luchesy?"

"No, I'm for Dvortsy, thanks."

"What do you know about the district if you haven't been to Bratichi?" was the first thing Kostya asked her after they had been introduced. And as she was slow to reply he made up her mind for her.

"You are going there with me right away," he said in a tone that brooked no refusal. "That's right, in a trap. Never mind, I'll get you there safely. You can leave your suitcase behind here. And for the future let me advise you to use a rucksack."

Kostya did not look quite like how Zhenya had imagined him from what Vasily had told her (she and Vasily had become good friends at Bolshany), but after those words she realized that it was all right, he had to be like this—tousle-headed, with eyes glowing with excitement, short and nimble on his feet.

They drove ten versts in a rattling trap and Zhenya concentrated all her will-power on keeping herself from crying out and clutching at Kostya every time they ran over a bump.

The school year had not begun but the school yard was alive with children. Bare-footed little boys and girls with silver earrings were digging up the ground to form a circular trench.

"This is where we'll have the Isle of the Industrious," Kostya explained as they walked past.

The children thronged round him. Drawing away from Zhenya he paced the future island, measuring distances.

"Careful!" he called suddenly, turning sharply to Zhenya. "You're walking over the Atlantic Ocean."

The children joined in noisily. Zhenya's look of astonishment delighted them. Of course it was the Atlantic Ocean.

"Don't you see? This is a relief map of the world with the outlines of the continents, and the rivers and mountains. We're going to surface it with cement. And in spring we'll add plants so that the children can learn where they grow. Town children need to be taught manual labour so that they don't grow up unable to do anything with their own hands, but out here in these remote parts they have to be taught to dream. That's what my conception of polytechnical education is." Kostya said these last few words in a low voice, for her ears only.

Stepping over the sandy range of the Himalayas—no higher than a furrow in a potato field—followed by watchful glances of the children, Zhenya really did feel that

at this moment she had suddenly discovered a new world.... What a clever fellow Kostya was, she told herself with delight.

Flinging the door open before her, Kostya led her through empty class-rooms. In one corner a ruffled owl was perched, in a little hut fox cubs ran to and fro as regularly as a pendulum. They responded to the call, "Foxie, foxie." A glass case, its bottom covered with pieces of bark and fir twigs, served as a winter home for ants.

"We dug the whole nest up in the forest and in spring we're going to put it on the Isle of the Industrious. See those little lamps? They work from a special battery. When the light's switched off the ants go to sleep. Once I happened to be away from Bratichi for a couple of days and when I came back and looked at this case I saw the ants were simply staggering with fatigue. 'Did you feed them?' I asked. 'Yes.' It turned out that the lights had been left on for two days and so the ants went on working. They have a rule: they rest only when it's dark."

How splendid, thought Zhenya. For Kostya the world was somehow a broader, more interesting, more densely populated place than it was for others....

"Are you a biologist?" she asked him.

"No, philosophy's my subject," answered Kostya, a little sadly. But the cloud soon passed.

In the school allotment where fragrant stems of hemswayed they had got on to the subject of the prospects for the collective farm as a whole.

"In my opinion Bratichi is now coming up into the first line in this district," said Zhenya, proud to be in the swim. "It'll probably be in the millionaire category this year."

"Millionaire! Why, it could be that twenty times over. I've told Lyubikov that too."

And, noticing her incredulous look, he flushed resentfully.

"Let me give you an example. Look there!" His arm took in all their surroundings. "They used to cultivate this allotment piecemeal—a bit of rye, some oats, vegetables. It brought in about a thousand rubles at most. It was only last spring that my predecessor got a brain wave. 'Look,' he said, 'let's grow only vegetables and hemp. That'll bring in more.' I've done some reckoning—this autumn the allotment will bring in at least eight thousand, mainly from hemp. Hemp, why, it's—oh, you can't imagine." His forefinger rose in a gesture almost of veneration. "I said to Lyubikov, 'Alexei Tikhonovich, you've got forty hectares under hemp, why not two hundred? You've got the land and the labour.' He hesitated: 'Two hundred....' I took pencil and paper and showed him what it would bring the kolkhoz. 'No,' he said, 'a hundred's enough to start with.... Hemp dries up the earth something terrible!' The agronomist was standing beside us. 'Well,' he said, 'that means we'll finally have to establish a firm crop rotation and start farming properly.' You see, on our own little patch here at the school we'll make forty thousand in three years. Where from, you ask?" Kostya pointed at some two-year-old apple-trees, each of them carefully propped up. "We've only fifty of 'em now. This year we'll have another two hundred in. See what potentialities we've got. And we've got less than a hectare here—and Bratichi has two thousand."

Although even Zhenya with her modicum of experience of life understood that things were not quite as easy as all that and that Lyubikov must have his reasons for objecting to Kostya's plans, she could not but be carried away by Kostya's unbounded vitality, so akin to her own desire to do everything with her own hands, now, straight away. It seemed to her that Kostya's mind

was constantly on the boil and that the more work he was given to do the more energetic he became.

Kostya suddenly broke off in the middle of their conversation and looked through the cloud of dust that hung over the road towards a field of buckwheat that was just in sight over a rise.

"Where are my youngsters, I wonder?" he muttered, glancing at his watch. "My kids carry milk to the nearest field team this harvest time. The ones that work farther out get it brought by cart but this is too near for that and anyway the horses are all busy on farm work."

He drew himself up to his full height and called through cupped hands:

"He-e-ey, kids."

The children answered him from far away. Through the swirling dust a pack of boys and girls came running.

Waiting for them to come up Kostya said pensively:

"How jealous they are of one another. Just you try to show a little more attention to one than to another. I never thought that children's affection was so deep and disturbing a feeling. After all, a child doesn't yet know what he wants of another person. . . ."

The girls arrived first, dusty, their hair unkempt, their legs covered with scratches—and then the air was full of twittering.

"Konstantin Yevgenyevich! Milking'll begin in a minute, they've put out the cans. Konstantin Yevgenyevich!"

They sat down on the grass watching Zhenya without a trace of shyness, their arms clasping their bony knees—flat-chested fifth-form girls still too young for coquetry. Among them were some with whom Kostya had been on excursions around Bratichi. They had memories in common ("D'you remember the time the stick caught fire and the whole bucket fell right into the fire?"). Laughing and joking they recalled various little incidents the

memory of which brought colour to their cheeks—from pleasure or embarrassment.

When the cans of warm milk were brought up the children carried them in turns: their young arms were strained as taut as violin strings. Sometimes Kostya helped them but generally it was the children who did the carrying. Heavy? It doesn't matter. And they said stubbornly too:

“It doesn't matter.”

When her turn came Zhenya also carried a can. She wanted to ask Kostya how he had discovered the secret of such a good and happy life. Was it possible for someone to know where his true calling lay? Kostya, however, had no time just then for a philosophic conversation so she kept her questions to herself and merely walked beside him, laughing with the children at every word he said.

“Listen, why don't you stay here with us?” Kostya said suddenly, turning to her. “I really mean it. You could teach literature to the senior forms and we'd find you somewhere comfortable to live. Make up your mind quickly though, while there's still a vacancy. What d'you say, kids, shall we make Yevgenia Vasilyevna stay in Bratichi?”

“Yes!” cried the children with one voice and at once started eyeing her with friendly but critical looks.

Zhenya also found herself examining them from a different point of view: could she cope with such children as these? Her sigh of regret was barely noticeable.

Kostya who was observing her every motion put his own interpretation on this sigh.

“Or is there someone . . . something that's keeping you there?” he asked, unable to conceal an involuntary note of jealousy. When one is young how easily affection is awakened and how peremptorily, how autocratically does it demand rights!

Zhenya did not reply. The bundle of letters from Boris Turashev ("Zhenya dear, I am writing this first of all to repeat a thousand times. . .") lay in her bag, but was that a pledge for all her life? She did not know. And so she only shook her head of overgrown hair—the curls only at the very tips now—and tried to turn the whole conversation into a joke.

She felt flattered by Kostya Sosnin's interest in her but what interested her more than anything else just then was how she could find her way into life, how she could find her real place in the world. And once again she looked with a touch of envy at that short young man who walked with quick steps beside her, so full of imagination, and yet so very sure of the way he was going. . .

Of course, Zhenya would have found it difficult to imagine (neither Kostya nor Vasily of course would have dreamed of telling her about it) that not very long before, both the young men had considered themselves complete failures. Incidentally, when it became clear that they would not become post-graduates, Kostya fell into a mood of gloomy irony while Vasya grew quietly melancholic. Those were the frames of mind in which they faced the appointments board. They listened, eyes downcast, as they were offered a choice of several regions of the republic.

"It's all the same to me," each of them replied.

These answers caused some eyebrows to lift and they were appointed to Polesie, a part of the country which to the students of Byelorussia means very much the same as Kamchatka does to students of the Russian Federation.

"Glubin?" they said when they reached the regional capital. "Certainly. What difference does it make to us?"

Had they been offered work on an ice-floe or in the crater of an active volcano they would have behaved in

the same way. They enjoyed their own martyrdom. Kostya had gone into Klyucharev's office with the ardent spirit of a militant frondeur. But when he reached Bratichi and his "own school" and found himself alone with the members of his staff who were all older than him, when he walked through the empty echoing class-rooms, so soon to be filled with children, he could not but drop his ironic mask. But how was Vasily getting on? Kostya found himself in a cold sweat at the very thought. He could picture Vasily sitting before the same withering looks of his pupils and teaching staff and in his thoughts he said to him: "Listen, old man, we weren't given the blue University badge to be incapable of handling a situation like this."

The presentiment of struggle overwhelmed him before he introduced himself to his staff, and he accepted it as a challenge. And that was just as well because he faced his colleagues not as a shy greenhorn from the town but as a restive and evidently not particularly obliging fellow. The old teachers who had intended to appear condescending and patronizing to the young headmaster at first, tacitly swung to the exactly opposite point of view: let him stew in his own juice, why should we feel sorry for him?

Kostya Sosnin was not called on to go through fire and water during his testing period—he was beleaguered by trivialities. He found that without his personal permission not a single ventilation window could be opened in the class-rooms—it was as if not he but all the others were new to the place. He had no experience at all and accepted it as something that was in the order of things and would be like that always. But at night when he dropped on to his temporary bed of planks covered with a thin straw mattress, instead of lamenting the fact that his days were full of these humiliating, wearisome trivialities, he felt gratified, exultant even. In

some strange manner it was not his mind but his tired body, now relishing a well-earned rest, that brought him to realize that everything he had done hitherto, all his tireless activities at school and university, had been only a preliminary sketch of the real thing.

During August Kostya was kept fairly busy: he supervised the repairs at the school, made the rounds of the villages, checking the school attendance lists and acquainting himself with the conditions in which his future pupils lived, overhauled the school equipment and even found time to write to his friends at Minsk asking them to send him various things for the school (list attached).

His letters were couched in ironic terms spiced with self-pity ("I'm living at the world's end of the universal education system"), but his phrases had nothing in common with his real life. He was ashamed to admit that after failing to become a post-graduate he was not only able to breathe, eat and drink but also to enjoy himself immensely, doing things in his little far-away Glubin. And not even in Glubin itself (because from where he was Glubin seemed to be quite a large place, even a capital city), but simply in Bratichi, a village.

He was afraid his Minsk friends would not understand him.

The truth was that there were never two days alike for Kostya now. For instance, on one fine autumn morning one of the kolkhoz team-leaders, Prokhor Skulovets, called at the school all worked up and appealing for help. There was a touch of frost at night, but the beetroot hadn't been taken up yet. It was probably against all rules and regulations but Kostya cancelled lessons, gathered all the school children into the hall and told them about the vegetable team's plight.

They left the school to the beat of a kettledrum, with banners unfurled; and the old women turned from their

housework and peeped through the windows. Many of them were probably thinking: "Our grandchildren will live a different, a more beautiful life."

Kostya and Vasily met rarely these days: twenty-three kilometres of country road lay between Bratichi and Bolshany. But the *esprit de corps* of their student days which had served them in such good stead in the early days did not disappear, it simply transformed itself into loyalty to a different group of people.

"Vasily! Vaska!" Kostya yelled familiarly one day when they met in Glubin at the district stadium. He nudged his friend in the ribs, thumped him on the back and said teasingly in his slightly hoarse young bass voice:

"Well, philosopher. Still sitting in your Bolshany barrel? Isn't it beginning to leak?"

Kostya felt even a little annoyed at the sight of the embarrassed face of his friend whose reaction to his own joy was somewhat too feeble.

"What's wrong? Swallowed a cockroach with your breakfast?" he went on, recalling a crude joke from their days in the university hostel.

Vasily replied in confusion, scarcely opening his lips:

"Can't you see I've got my pupils around?"

The colour rushed to Kostya's cheeks. He felt vexed with himself for his thoughtlessness and for the first time in his life he addressed his friend by his name and patronymic, with that touch of respect and gravity which his calling deserved now.

In order to chat more intimately they drew aside. It was a golden bright day. The stadium shone with new grass which without a thought for the calendar had sprung up again even after the third cutting. Kostya told his friend how after a conference at the regional town he had managed to slip off to Minsk for a day and

had come back with a rich haul of school equipment, retorts, maps and diagrams. Bolshany had never dreamed of having such things.

"Did you get to the Opera?" Vasily asked, a little chagrined.

Kostya waved the question aside:

"And lose another day? Why, I had the school year right under my nose!"

Then he recollected himself and with an insincere sigh went on:

"Oh, dear, dear. We're becoming such clods in these remote parts...."

Averting their faces slyly they turned the conversation from the slippery theme of the past to current topics.

"Wait a minute," Vasily suddenly interrupted Kostya. He gripped his arm tightly and looked hard at the circle that had been cleared for the performers.

Out of a group of Bolshany girls wearing crimson, blue and green kerchiefs one girl stepped forward. Her legs with their elegant little high boots carried her with a light, almost dancing gait into the middle of the ring.

She sang in a high laughing voice. The chorus at once overtook her and the young men, almost out of sight behind girls as tall as themselves, sang in seconds—firmly, heavily, hardly keeping up with her:

*Good old Grannie,
Dear old Grannie
Had more cows than she could tell.
Dear old Grannie,
Good old Grannie,
Tell me which one will you sell?*

"Every man has the gift he was born with," boomed a Polesian in a grey short coat, who was standing near by.

Kostya strained forward a little.

"Is she one of yours?" he asked. "From Bolshany?"

"Mine," said Vasily, suddenly choking over the word.

2

Klyucharev had been out of the district for a week: he attended a session of the Supreme Soviet of the Republic and afterwards took part in a republican plenum of the Central Committee; no sooner back he left for a tour of the collective farms after merely glancing in at his office.

At Lyubikov's place he found trouble at once: the autumn ploughing had started but the loose straw left by the combine had not been properly cleared and the tractor-driver had written a complaint against the kolkhoz chairman. Lyubikov had refused to sign it. The tractor-driver was indignant, and let Klyucharev know it.

Lyubikov came up—a tall man with slightly bowed shoulders, gentle blue eyes rimmed by curling lashes and a young face that habitually wore a good-natured smile. Now, meeting the tractor-driver's look, he scowled and looked away.

"Is this true?" asked Klyucharev, half-stern, half-jocular. He watched Lyubikov with tender pride—he was fond of the man, his protégé, his pupil.

Lyubikov coloured deeply with mortified anger.

"So you want me to sign it? Why couldn't he start on one of the other fields and change his ploughing schedule? Too high-principled, eh? All right, I'll sign it." He scribbled his signature, muttering broken threats at the MTS: if they were going to act like this, then the kolkhoz would act the same way....

"What's this?" Klyucharev said quietly. Though there was a minatory note in his voice his eyes were still smiling.

"Well, after all, Fyodor Adrianovich. . . ."

He began to list his complaints hurriedly. But Klyucharev listened with only half an ear.

"And this is Lyubikov! To think that Lyubikov would do a thing like this!" Klyucharev went on sternly. "Out for revenge, are you?"

Lyubikov expostulated a bit more, then sighed, smiled and made a gesture of resignation. Klyucharev invited him into his car and they drove on together to the management office.

"Alexei, if you don't want to believe me, then believe the Central Committee of the Party: the MTS is your right hand."

"I know that all right, Fyodor Adrianovich, but our MTS, you know—"

"It takes time to make an MTS perfect too. Your trouble is that you put your pride above state interests. Seems to me it's easier to reach international agreement than to establish confidence between the MTS and the kolkhoz chairmen in our district. Oh, you shouldn't disappoint me on such a fine day."

Klyucharev arrived at Bolshany in the evening without having warned anybody he was coming.

On the way his car overtook a couple walking along the road. Sasha the driver deliberately caught them in the merciless glare of both headlights.

The young man had an accordion slung over his shoulder. The girl screwed up her eyes and covered her face with her hands. The car came to a halt.

"Good-evening," said Klyucharev politely. "How are you, Serafima? Is your hand better, Myshniak? Get in, we'll take you along with us."

Rosy-cheeked Serafima Ptitsa looked at Klyucharev shyly. Myshniak stepped forward a pace, screening her; the beads on her dark bodice glittered like multicoloured starlets in the slanting beam of light, then vanished.

Klyucharev suddenly recalled that Kuprin's wild forest beauty Olesya was supposed to have lived somewhere in these parts.

But even the famed Olesya could not have been more beautiful than Serafima with her large blue eyes—so pure, so candid—those delicate brows that rose in surprise on her white forehead, those smiling lips.

"No, Comrade secretary," she replied with the directness of youth. "We'll walk."

They drove on slowly, reluctantly, and all the way to Bolshany they heard Serafima's song behind them:

*Folk may say that I'm too small;
Let them spare their pity.
I don't care for them at all,
Johnnie thinks me pretty.*

The song rang out like a pure silver bell. "Have you ever heard her sing?" Klyucharev recalled Antonina's words and sighed. "What d'you think, Sasha, is it better to drive in a car or walk like that?"

"Better to walk, no matter how fine a car you have," said Sasha, and he sighed too.

*Here's the hat and there's the frock
Which I mean to wear.
Folks can smile and folks can mock,
I shan't turn a hair!*

At the Bolshany kolkhoz office they found the new chairman, Snezhko, one-time district committee instructor. He was sitting, his head cupped in his hands, going over the accounts with Klava Borvinka, the bookkeeper.

"I can't imagine how Blishchuk found time to drink, I can't even find time to sleep," he said after shaking Klyucharev's hand long and heartily.

Klyucharev sat down beside him and leafed through the thick ledger.

"Well, Nikolai Grigoryevich, not shaking in your boots, are you?"

Klava, bold and saucy like all Bolshany girls, replied at once, darting a glance that took in both Klyucharev and the new chairman:

"What makes you think we're so terrible, Comrade secretary?"

Snezhko merely smiled.

Nikolai Snezhko was one of those men who are difficult to weigh up at first glance: he seemed a young, jolly fellow who could take a drink or two in company and never shirk a job if it were given him—though he wasn't the sort to volunteer for it. He had brought back from the front the saying: "When we're gone we won't be no more," and he used it everywhere, where it fitted and where it didn't, sometimes jokingly, sometimes sarcastically, sometimes defiantly.

Before, when Klyucharev found his eyes resting on Snezhko he would think to himself what a devilish handsome fellow Snezhko was, but, to tell the truth, he had never reflected very hard about what lay behind the man's dark brows.

Early that summer Snezhko had gone to the region centre to ask for a land reclamation party to be sent to the district. A day or two after he had left a telegram had arrived from Minsk, the capital of the republic: "Worrying life out of Ministry. Send money." When he returned to Glubin he brought good news with him: the reclamation party was on its way. In addition, he brought invoices for the delivery to Glubin of various machines: two brush-cutters, one rooting-out machine, two ditch-diggers.

"I'll tell you how I got 'em," he said. "The deputy minister would tell me to get out of his office but I

would call again and again. 'Oh, you damned Glubin nuisance!' he said. 'That's right,' I'd say, 'I *am* from Glubin. That was marked on my papers.' "

When Grudik replaced Blishchuk temporarily at Bolshany it was Snejhko who was the first to say in the district office:

"No, Grudik hasn't got the drive, Fyodor Adriano-vich. He won't straighten out the muddle Blishchuk's left."

"Well, who else do you propose for the job?" said Klyucharev in a tired, irritated voice. "Maybe you think *I* should take over?"

"No, not you."

"You, then?" and he found himself studying Snejhko carefully, as if he had never seen the man before.

Snejhko merely twitched his shaggy brows in response to Klyucharev's keen glance.

"If the district committee entrusted me with the job I'd go to Bolshany."

"Well, look here, Nikolai Grigoryevich," Klyucharev had said on that occasion (that was about a month before they met in Bolshany) in a quite different tone of voice, "we've finished work for today. I'm sure your wife won't mind if you come and have a cup of tea with me. You'll also tell me about Lobko. You went to see him, didn't you?"

"I did. I'd like to start taking a correspondence course at the institute myself next autumn, Fyodor Adriano-vich. What d'you think about it? Lobko is lecturing on political economy there. He promised to help me over the entrance exams."

"What about me? He doesn't seem to want *me* there," Klyucharev grumbled enviously. "Well, let's shake hands on it, it's a fine thing to study. You'll be the first kolkhoz chairman with a higher education in our district."

The news that Klyucharev had arrived ran quickly round the village and before long the room was as full as if a meeting had been convened. Every new arrival greeted Klyucharev formally, shaking his hand and smiling all over his face. It was a long time since they had seen the Party secretary last.

Klyucharev did not sit at the desk, but perched himself on the window-sill. He kept on his overcoat. The white scarf at his sun-burned neck lent his appearance a touch of easy informality, as though he had just come back from his holidays.

"Well," he said, puffing a cloud of cigarette smoke into the air, "what good things have you been doing here during the past month?"

People smiled and exchanged glances.

"We took in the harvest and did our state deliveries. We're ditching. We're carting the peat. We're giving Luchesy a hand with the potato crop. We've distributed advances on the work-days...." Anton Semenchuk listed the farm's achievements on his fingers, as strong and dark as tree roots.

"What else?"

"We're planting fruit-trees, Comrade secretary."

"How many hectares?"

"Twelve."

"Why, that'll come to only one apple each on holidays for your people here. Why not plant twenty? Listen, comrades, the whole board's here, let's decide this question straight away. Next year you'll not be able to get the saplings you want: now many of the kolkhozes can't afford to buy them but they'll get on. But you're millionaires, you can spare the cash now."

Everybody laughed. Snejhko slapped the table with the palm of his hand.

"Agreed," he said, his eyes sparkling. "Let's spend another two thousand rubles on saplings."

"Right. Any other news?"

Everybody racked his memory.

"We're building a garage and a piggery."

"No, I mean something new. You started on these a long while back."

"We've done a lot of ditching," Semenchuk said with a note of pride. "We want to make a real good job of reclaiming our land: a hundred hectares to be drained, two hundred cleared of roots. By the end of autumn we'll have a ditch right down to the Glubin."

Klyucharev took in the whole room with a sly bantering look.

"I've heard you're all asking to have Blishchuk back, all pining for him."

Snezhko, falling in with his joke, ruminated aloud:

"Then that means I'll go back to the district committee. Or shall I have to look around for some other job, Fyodor Adrianovich?"

Although everyone realized that they were joking, someone called out in alarm:

"Nobody is pining for Blishchuk."

Klyucharev lit a cigarette from the lamp. His face lit up, his eyes turned quite transparent and mischievous.

"I don't know about you but I like this new chairman of yours."

"So do we." There was relief in their voices.

The colour rushed suddenly to Snezhko's cheeks. This annoyed him so much that he knit his thick brows and mumbled:

"What have I got to do with it all? Everybody's helping."

And, turning to Klyucharev, he said, as if the praise that had been bestowed on him called for frankness:

"There's one thing that's gone wrong. I'm even ashamed to tell you about it. We've ploughed up six hectares of clover. We sent the tractor-driver to one place

and he went and ploughed somewhere else by mistake. We should have kept an eye on him."

"Same thing with your silage, wasn't it?" beamed Klyucharev with the most good-natured of smiles.

People exchanged glances.

"I was surprised to hear about it. Bolshany wasting six hundred hectares of potato tops—not a single ton of silage from the lot! And what about the decree of the September Plenum? Everything, literally everything is supposed to go into producing more milk, more meat."

"It was a mistake," said Snejhko, dropping his eyes.

"If you make mistakes like that, Comrade Snejhko.... Why, you used to rile at the chairmen for such things yourself, when you sat on the district committee!"

There were smiles all round.

"Oh, it was easier there."

"Why?"

"Oh, I had you behind me then. Now I'm in charge myself."

"Listen to that, he had me behind him! And who have I got behind me? Oh, now, comrades, we'll never get anywhere that way. Now, there's another mistake I want to remind you of. How did you sow your potatoes this spring? In rows? You've wasted your work, the crops are low. D'you trust the Party? D'you believe that what it's doing is for the good of the people?"

"Aye, we believe that," everyone breathed assent, their eyes glued on Klyucharev.

"So if the Party recommends you to plant your potatoes not in rows but by checkerboard method it means it's a better way of doing it. Sure enough there are some who splutter that the old way is better and gives a bigger crop. Don't you fall for that!"

Klyucharev stopped to reflect. His eyes roamed the room and caught those of Vasily Moroz, the second-in-

charge at the local school. Vasily had arrived late and sat near the door, his thin sensitive fingers in his lap.

"Another thing we ought to do is to make our lives more interesting. Now, that choir of yours is pretty good. Why don't you have a band too? D'you think you could run a band, Comrade Moroz?"

Vasily drew himself up at once and nodded affirmatively. The others shuffled and started calculating: what would a band cost? Fifteen thousand?

"No, less than that. Thirteen and a half. I'll go and buy the instruments myself. Why, you've got children growing up here. If your daughters go to Minsk or Moscow and take a look around they'll find it dull to come and live here afterwards. Take Semenchuk's son, for instance. When he finishes school he'll have his claims against us too. What form is he in, Anton Ivanovich?"

Semenchuk blushed deeply, his forelock stuck to his damp brow.

"He doesn't go to school any more," he wheezed.

"That's what I was driving at. You've taken him away from school. Why are you ruining the boy's life? He wants to go on studying. He's a bright lad. Even to plant potatoes by checkerboard method you've got to know what horizontal and vertical lines are. Old days of peasant ignorance are over, Comrade Semenchuk. You see that your boy's at school tomorrow, understand?" Klyucharev bored Semenchuk with his narrowed eyes. "Well, what else are you thinking of building?" he asked after a pause. "A bathhouse? A crèche? A new office building?"

"We shall have a splendid piggery," said Snejhko hurriedly, relieved that the discussion had taken a different turn. "There won't be a better in the whole region, Bratichi's won't be a patch on it."

"You only think that way because you haven't seen anything outside Glubin except in the newsreels and those you don't believe."

"We're not looking beyond the district borders yet," said Snezhko modestly and added slyly in a dreamy voice, "If we could have another fifty cubic metres of building timber and some roof sheeting...."

"You'll have the sheeting and you can get the timber from Karelia," said Klyucharev jokingly. "Some of your folk went there, didn't they, let them cut a few trees down for you."

Snezhko scratched his head with embarrassment and there was a general shuffling of feet in the room: Bolshany should have sent eleven to help with the timber felling in Karelia, but only three had gone. The official who had come to recruit labour was still waiting for the rest.

"How's this? You want to build yourselves but you don't want to go and fell the timber. Life is becoming smooth and easy for you here in Bolshany, you're making millions, but surely you ought to think of others a little. We can't cut the trees down round these parts, they'd take a century to grow again. But there's plenty in the North. Don't you see, we ought to be able to arrange things properly in our own state, we ought to plan, oughtn't we?"

Snezhko sat looking glum.

"Our motor's stalled, Fyodor Adrianovich. The MTS ought to be made to do something about it for us."

Klyucharev chuckled again.

"Tell me, how many people have you sent to take courses in tractor-driving? Not one, eh? The same old story. Want 'em mailed to you from Moscow and Leningrad? I suppose you imagine they'll soon be making cows in the factories. No, comrades, it looks as if the only part of the Plenums decisions that you've

read is the one where it's said that life ought to get better. You're not concerned with how to make it better."

The room was blue with smoke. The two lamps burned hotly. Klyucharev had hinted several times that a few hours' sleep wouldn't harm anyone but nobody left the room. The people kept their eyes glued on him avidly and insistently. Uninhibited joy was written on their faces. It was obvious that they had been longing for him to come and talk to them.

"No more complaints, then? Grudik, when did you last go to the cinema? And what about you, Chikailo?"

Chikailo leaned forward, clutching his chair.

"That must have been when I was in the army, Comrade secretary."

"Costs too much, eh? Then why doesn't the kolkhoz book a whole showing for a hundred and fifty rubles and sell the tickets cheaply? Life must be dull here with no pictures to see and no newspapers coming."

"Oh, we subscribe to the papers. Every team...."

Klyucharev was called to the telephone. Some people, after waiting awhile for him to return, started moving reluctantly towards the door when Blishchuk entered the room. His eyes were as dull as lead, his lips trembled with a desperate drunken sense of hurt.

People made way for him in silence.

"I'm not going to let you get my bonus for the flax," he shouted at Snezhko. "I did the work. I'm not going to see you get the money for it."

He pushed his way through, a small drunken man who looked rather like a mushroom with his cap flattened on the crown of his head.

"And what are *you* going to get the bonus for? For breaking the Artel Rules?"

"I worked, I worked."

"You mean you took bribes and drank yourself pie-eyed."

Snezhko sprang to his feet—tall, powerful, white-faced, his broad mobile brows grimly furrowed over his remarkably fine, dark-fringed eyes.

Blishchuk was shivering feverishly: obviously he no longer cared what he did—a little more or less chalked up against him—what did that matter?

"I paid for my own drinks."

"With the kolkhoz money."

"Anyway, I didn't slaughter any sheep," Blishchuk spat out.

Snezhko shook with fury. But for the broad table between them and the crowd in the room the two men would have been at grips.

"Are you trying to say I killed any? Before my family came to join me I bought meat from the kolkhoz. Paid eight rubles a kilogram for it, like the tractor-drivers do. You . . . you . . ."

Klyucharev returned, and stood before Blishchuk with his coat flapping open.

"Shut up, Blishchuk, the investigation isn't finished yet. You may still find yourself in jail, I'm telling you. So forget about the bonuses. You drank away . . ."

"And I'll go on drinking," Blishchuk shouted back. He had lost all control of himself though he involuntarily turned his eyes away from Klyucharev. "All right, I'll sit out my five years in jail but afterwards I'll come back and I'll do what I like."

The rest of the exchanges were incoherent and wild. Klyucharev, however, kept his voice low.

"Let's go to the club and listen to the choir practise," he said suddenly and drew Snezhko away. The others followed them, turning their eyes away in embarrassment from the ex-chairman.

Left on his own, Blishchuk came to his senses, groaned and slumped heavily on to a chair, burying his face in his hands.

The club-house at Bolshany was a big, well-built place, but ill-lit—they used kerosene lamps. In one room the village young people were dancing to the sounds of a concertina and tambourine. In another Vasily Moroz was conducting the choir. He merely glanced at Klyucharev who understood and stepped aside.

The lamps in the corners of the room flickered from the breath of many mouths. The choristers stood in a semicircle. In front were the schoolgirls as earnest as if they were taking an exam; behind them stood a line of young men with a bearded face here and there; they sang with fervour, obedient to every motion of the conductor's hands. Serafima Ptitsa, the soloist, kept her wide-opened eyes fixed on Vasily's face, as if at that moment her whole life and happiness lay concentrated in that fair-haired young man, a newcomer to their village.

Klyucharev felt a wave of tenderness and envy for the girl. There was nothing, it seemed to him, nothing in his own life that he would not sacrifice in order to see this next generation happy and free and proud of its record in life.

Why do we all love youth so much?

From all sides hands stretch out to help and support youth. For youth is hope. We love in youth the miracles it is capable of performing. We believe in those summits which it aspires to reach. We follow youth's every step with disinterested and sympathetic looks: "Go on, go on! Whatever we failed to do (and who is there who has not failed in something in his life?) you will conquer and achieve. You will know glory, you will be loved, you will be energetic...."

Klyucharev, a man of thirty-seven, his head full of worries, now looked at Serafima with paternal affection. "Oh, you're growing old, Fyodor," he thought with sadness and pride, "and now, dear comrade, you are responsible for everything on earth."

He stole a glance at Snezhko who was sitting against the wall looking glum, his strong clear-cut mouth shut tight.

"Come on, Nikolai Grigoryevich, calm down," Klyucharev said, touching the other on the shoulder. "Let's go and have a talk."

Snezhko's wife Nadezhda must have been already in bed when they knocked on the door. She wore tall felt boots over her bare legs when she let the two men in.

"Why, Fyodor Adrianovich!" she gasped, rubbing her eyes. "Nikolai never said a word that you were coming."

She hastily sliced some tomatoes into a salad bowl and laid the table haphazardly with eggs, honey, salt meat.

"Well, if he can't bring himself to speak about it, I'll tell you myself," she said querulously. "After all, you didn't send him here to be made a laughing-stock of, did you? Blishchuk's wife pesters us something terrible. Their elder boy throws stones at our little fellow—I'm afraid to let him out into the yard alone...."

As Klyucharev listened he nodded and looked around the room. The cottage ceiling was low with heavy cross-beams; the windows were small and closely screened with potted plants; there were several pictures from *Ogonyok* fixed to the wall with drawing-pins.

"How poor and ugly our lives still are," thought Klyucharev. "Over there in the cities the artists are probably loafing about doing nothing, arguing madly about which way they ought to paint while here you can't buy a decent picture in the whole district. In fact, people in these parts have never seen a proper picture in their lives."

"It's true, Fyodor Adrianovich," said Snejhko at last, his voice full of entreaty. "Get that Blishchuk out of the place. Oh, I know you feel sorry for him. Well, find him a job somewhere else. Let him make a fresh start."

"The way I see it, let him start by settling his bill here. I have no intention to lead him away by the hand like a small boy. I want him to leave Bolshany for a new job of his own free will—like a proper man."

"No chance of that," grumbled Snejhko.

"Don't worry, we can wait. He'll go through a bad time and then he'll come to his senses. Vodka tastes bitterer than mustard to him now, he only drinks out of stubbornness."

"You always think people are better than they really are, Fyodor Adrianovich," said Nadezhda, wide awake now.

"Not at all," said Klyucharev with sudden anger that brought the veins out on his forehead. "I don't want to think them worse, that's what it is."

No! It is not true that the year has three hundred and sixty-five days. It has thousands upon thousands of days if that is the rhythm the heart beats to. And the sun does not rise over Bolshany just once a day. It rises every time Serafima's eyes meet those of the new school-teacher.

She goes to see him in the evenings in the empty school where the window-frames have been lined with thick white paper against the winter cold so that not a sound breaks out. And they both sit for an hour or two over sheet music.

What a strange man is Vasily Yemelyanovich! He's usually so shy, he often blushes, even during lessons if one of his pupils gets into a muddle—that is what Serafima has learned from her little brother who is in the sixth form. But how strict and cold he is with Serafima, how imperatively he flourishes his hands at choir practice where, strange to say, everybody is a bit scared of him! As for Serafima, she is simply petrified with terror if she strikes a false note. Serafima had always been considered the best singer in Bolshany; she had grown quite accustomed to her fame; but at first Vasily Yemelyanovich had not seemed in the least impressed.

"You ought to study," he said more in reproach than in praise at their first practice.

Serafima's betrothed, Dmitro Myshniak, cast a jaundiced look at Vasily when he heard him say that, but Vasily silently raised his hand and Myshniak froze to attention, his fingers on the stops of his accordion.

Dmitro and Serafima were thought of as a good pair.

"They'll marry and build a cottage out of song and their songs will be food and drink to them," people said of them in the village.

Serafima too could think of no better companion in life than Dmitro. But why then did she start going to the school of an evening, forgetting about village gatherings and cinema? That was clear enough. They were rehearsing for the song festival and Serafima had to sing solo.

Myshniak had grown used to hearing the new words that Serafima dropped now and again. Only on one occasion, egged on by the girls' hints, did he come clumping menacingly into the class-room. But after sitting in a corner for half an hour listening to what was going on, he convinced himself that Serafima and the school-teacher were really practising. She was studying solfeggio. And this solfeggio made him feel so uncomfortable—the voice flowing like a stream, then breaking off at the first

flick of the teacher's hand—that he got up and *left* without a word, without, moreover, fully realizing what had been revealed to him on that occasion.

Meanwhile the wind was sweeping the first autumn leaves through Bolshany.

Only when Vasily Moroz was occupied with a teachers' meeting or something did Serafima resume her visits to the club and join her girl-friends and Dmitro. But she did not enjoy herself there as she used to.

"We must ask the chairman to buy us a piano in Minsk," she said. "Then we can learn to sing romances. I'm studying one with Vasily Yemelyanovich now. It's called 'When dancing was loudest.' Would you like me to teach you to sing it?"

And perhaps for the first time in the history of Russian chamber music the intimate words of Count Alexei Tolstoi were sung by a choir. But they sang it the right way: pensively, sadly, with heartfelt emotion.

Yes, they know how to sing at Bolshany. Not for nothing do you find names like Ptitsa, Chizh, Pevets* among the villagers. . . .

Shortly before the song festival Vasily told Serafima without daring to look her in the eyes that their accordion-player had left them in the lurch. She did not ask any questions, sat through to the end of her lesson and then ran off in search of Myshniak. For once he was hard to find: hard as she listened, Serafima could not hear the flow of his music anywhere.

They met unexpectedly in the dark street. Dogs were barking hollowly and there was not a single star in the sky.

"Dmitro, you're coming with us to Glubin for the festival, aren't you?" she asked at once.

He turned away in silence.

* Russian for a *bird, siskin, singer*.—Tr.

“No.”

And when he was some way off he shouted:
“And I’ve sold my accordion. Let your teacher play for
you. . . .”

4

Zhenya Vdovina met Serafima at Bratichi. Serafima had come over for the day.

It was early evening, the sun had just gone down, but the whole sky was aglow with little pink clouds. Zhenya was sitting on the warm porch and listening to old Melanya singing a lullaby indoors to little Volodya (neither Lyubikov nor his wife Shura was at home).

*Off to bed, my sleepy-head,
I will play with Puss instead.
Pussy, pussy, pussy cat,
What are you so angry at?
Pussy cat is cross because
He has chilled his little paws.
Pussy-puss, the blame is yours,
Don’t stay so late, sir, out of doors.*

The ditty seemed to have no end. It ran on like a thread from a bobbin. But the thread kept weaving new designs:

*Clappety-clap, clappety-clap,
A birdie came flying, flap-flap-flap.
Right on our gates she came and sat
In new red boots and a fine top hat.*

Zhenya held an open notebook on her knees. From time to time she jotted down a line or two and then

again sat motionless, screwing up her eyes or aimlessly following the play of the dying light on the clouds.

High hollyhocks bent their round pink heads over the fence. A strong scent of mint was wafted from the garden.

Zhenya looked across the rolling fields and thought—what a simple thought it was!—that songs live not on paper or in the thick folios over which she had sat for two years in Moscow libraries, but above all in the places where they are sung.

*Girlie, girlie, sweet and curlie,
Lips like honey,
Cheeks so funny,
Eyes like bits of silver money. . . .*

She listened smiling.

The tall flower-stems over the fence were parted silently by the hands of a fair-haired girl with a white kerchief. Her pink cheeks matched the hollyhocks.

“Greetings to you,” she said in the local manner.

Old Melanya came out on to the porch.

“So you’ve come,” she said rather churlishly. “Been here since morning and only just remembered your godmother.”

“Oh, Godmother dear!” the girl said laughing and, springing over the fence, fearlessly hugged the old woman and handed her a present wrapped in a parcel tied up criss-cross.

“This girl also knows some songs,” Melanya said proudly, turning to Zhenya. “Though not as many as I do.”

“Oh, now I know more than you, Godmother,” Serafima said archly and stole an inquisitive glance at Zhenya. “I’ve seen you at our school—with Vasily Yemelianovich,” she added shyly.

They sat round the table. Serafima conveyed to Mela-

nya greetings from various Bolshany folk and told her the latest news.

"When old marries young 'tis like mixing grain with dung," interjected the old woman sharply about someone Serafima had mentioned, and fell into a reverie.

"Well, Serafima, now that you've grown up..." Melania suddenly said solemnly and rising went to a side room behind a floral-patterned cotton curtain. She beckoned to the two girls to follow her.

She opened a deal chest with metal clasps. An odour of the past came from within. The chest was full of hand-woven linen and woollen clothes.

"You are the only one I have," the old woman whispered piteously. "I've nobody else to save these for. This will be your dowry when you wed. My own youth has gone; I was like a red rose but now I'm like a white birch."

She dropped her hands and carefully laid on the bench linen shirts embroidered and tied with red ribbons at the neck; woollen bodices known as *krymzelki*, with metal buttons; grey cloth tunics with leather-trimmed sleeves; broad belts woven out of red and blue thread with free designs and fringes (one belt like this had served several generations of Polesians); hats like truncated cones with the brims turned up; and then the women's garments (what a host of sad memories they brought back!) that the old woman intended to give Serafima for her trousseau; chemises broad at the shoulder and tight at the wrist, linen skirts, blouses that had to be laced up, known in those parts as *kitliks*—and even *namitka*: a narrow strip of cloth with embroidered ends. In Melania's time women used to wear this on their heads over a little sieve an inch or two high; the ends of the *namitka* stuck up like horns. . . .

Serafima looked with embarrassment at these fading treasures.

"Will you take it now or later?" enquired Melanya in a business-like manner. She was on the point of making a bundle of everything.

"Later on," said Serafima hastily and pressed her lips warmly to the old woman's sunken eyes. They sat on the chest holding each other close. Melanya laid her withered cheek on Serafima's shoulder.

"Nettles were my bed, salt tears my daily bread," she murmured, her eyes fixed on a linen kerchief which seemed to bring back to her some memories of the distant past. "That is how I have spent my days, daughters: like a fallen leaf.... When I was a bride my betrothed called me Malasha. With that white kerchief our hands were tied at our wedding. And when I married all I heard was: 'Hey, bring that, take that.' After I had my first child he began to call me Mother. Later, Granny. When he lay dying I sat there crying. 'Why are you crying?' he asked. 'I'm thinking,' I told him, 'that in all our life together you've never once called me by my proper name.' He turned over and died without uttering another word."

In the side room the dusk fell earlier than in the rest of the cottage; the Lyubikovs' half was still bathed in the bright pink light reflected from the velvety hollyhocks outside, but in the side room the three women sat very quietly in the twilight and watched the patterns vanish from the blouses and kerchiefs laid out on all the benches.

All that belonged to Polesie's past seemed to be peeping fearfully out of the worm-eaten chest. Oh, good riddance to it, including its embroidered *namitkas* and its songs where there were more tears than joy.

Zhenya sought Serafima's hand and squeezed it. Serafima looked up with calm thoughtful eyes.

"Yes, that's how they lived," those eyes seemed to be saying. "But what about me? What sort of life shall I have?"

"You will be happy," Zhenya's eyes seemed to say with conviction. "Serafima dear, you and I are going to live quite differently."

She suddenly felt indescribably happy. We live in a wonderful country! Even in the most difficult moments the reflection of the red banner lies on it. True, we have not yet crossed the threshold. We are standing in the anteroom of the future but the colour and the scent of this future already reach us through the early morning mist.

For a fraction of a moment Zhenya felt older and wiser than she really was: she felt herself responsible to the Soviet Land for this Polesie girl who had been born in another, quite alien world.

The side room smelled stuffy with its dried herbs and old clothes. Zhenya rose and drew back the curtain.

"Let's sing a nice song for Granny, Serafima," she proposed. "Quietly though, so we don't waken Volodya."

Later, when Serafima and Zhenya lay side by side on a coarse white sheet from under which yellow stalks of straw fell on the floor, they listened with equal concentration to the loudspeaker in the Lyubikovs' quarters as it carried to their ears the long drawn-out hoots of the cars on the Red Square followed by the chimes of the quarters and then the ponderous hammer-like blow of the first stroke of midnight. Serafima counted the strokes on her fingers: one, two, three.... When she reached the sixth Zhenya heaved a deep thoughtful sigh. The clock went on striking but now she did not hear it. She was wondering whether Klyucharev would call for her next day as he had promised, and whether Kostya Sosnin had gone to bed or was still sitting up to his neck in work.

The day before they had gone for a long walk through the village and only when the loudspeaker on the high pole outside the kolkhoz office had sounded the midnight

chimes had Kostya stopped and touched Zhenya's hand.

"Well, if you don't want to stay here at Bratichi, then you needn't," he had said. There had been a vexed note in his voice. "We're proud folk here, we don't beg. But promise me this: every time you hear the midnight chimes from the Red Square, count five strokes and on the sixth think of us Polesians. That won't be difficult for you, will it? Promise?"

"I promise," Zhenya had replied gravely.

"Who have you got waiting for you there in that Moscow of yours?" Kostya had blurted fiercely.

Zhenya had smiled guiltily.

"Serafima, are you in love with anyone?" she suddenly asked, pressing her cheek against the girl's shoulder. It was a question that no mother, no elder sister could ask, a question that only one friend could ask another.

Serafima lay silent, her eyes fixed in bewilderment on the wall.

On the table flickered a lamp with a lowered wick (the poles for the electric wiring were only being put up in Bratichi). Through the wall they heard Shura admonishing Lyubikov quietly and his friendly submissive answer, for he recognized the sway of this little woman.

Zhenya drew a hand from under the blanket and stroked Serafima's hair as though straightening one of her locks. She saw Serafima part her lips to speak several times, then suddenly shut them tight. No words came. But a moment later the girl made a confiding sort of noise and turning on her side flung her arms around Zhenya and drew her close....

However hard you try to conceal your feelings the time comes when you have to pluck up courage and look into your own heart. And Serafima saw into hers through the eyes of her friend.

Such piercing winds began to blow, such furious rain squalls came down that one might have thought it late autumn and not the sunny month of August.

A sturdy little mushroom-topped birch-tree waved its branches by the porch of the cottage where Serafima lived. The leaves spilled handfuls of big drops, and the whole tree shook and bent its tousled head from side to side, as though it had nowhere to repose it, nowhere to take refuge.

The cold grass, its blades glued together by the rain, clung low to the ground; only the tall stalks of the camomiles, the petals of their flowers clammy with rain, caught at Serafima's legs when she crossed the yard.

She picked the flowers absent-mindedly, fingering the dulled rain-soaked middles tenderly, and hurriedly started tearing the petals off: "He loves me, he loves me not, he kisses me...."

The rain gathered furious strength but for a few moments Serafima stood quite still in the yard, her head tossed back. Her face wore a blissful smile. Light grey clouds swept over her head. It seemed to her that she had only to spread her arms and she too would fly around the whole world as lightly as that scudding spray.

Love is like a great spring shock on a frozen river. For the whole winter the river has slept peacefully; it has even felt quite cosy there under the blue ice. Fish swam about dreamily in its depths without breaking the silence with their splashing. No matter how strong the wind that swept the plains, no matter how heavy the weight of snow that broke the branches on the trees—the river slept.

Ah, how pleasant to doze a whole winter, resting one's head on the soft bank!

Suddenly the day comes when the ice is rent like a piece of thick calico. The smashed ice clinks as it whirls in the water, whole fields of snow float with the current. Life breaks out of its stagnation and begins to move according to new laws.

Does not love transform man in the same way? The heart of one who is in love becomes capacious and more sensitive, one becomes enriched with generous new forces that grow the more one expends them. The one who loves feels capable of tackling any task; he is, as it were, running ahead with a banner, knowing full-well, without having to turn his head, that everyone else will spring to his feet and follow him.

True love leaves room for no other feelings, not even jealousy. Jealousy means doubt, jealousy is love stabbed in the back.

But when love is healthy no thought of perfidy can besmirch its clarity because the whole of it is directed like a sunbeam on another person. It has need of nothing except the happy knowledge that the object of one's love lives, for love is selfless without knowing that it is so.

All that Serafima knew was that the old days were over and the new days had started.

Not that the whole of her former world grew hateful to her or moved somewhere out of sight. No, it was simply bathed in a new light. The most familiar, commonplace objects stood out before her as though illuminated in a flash of lightning. She responded to them in an altogether different way. She knew now, with a certitude that set her heart beating faster, how she had to shape her life. She had to be the best, the most energetic, the most beautiful and—yes—the most famous of all. She wanted to become famous throughout the district. After all, the whole district knew Vasily Yemelyanovich. She had not yet made up her mind how she was going to achieve all that but she had not the least doubt that she

would succeed because Vasily Yemelyanovich deserved to have the best girl in the world. It wasn't his fault that he was loved by simple little Serafima.

Strange to say, Serafima never asked herself whether Vasily was in love with her. She had no time for that. All her spiritual strength went into deserving the right to love him.

In the old days she was always in a hurry to be out having fun. She would simply change her kerchief and leave her muddy boots by the door. Now she was often to be found at home, tidying up, scrubbing the floors so hard that the boards took on the colour of river sand, and polishing the windows to the brilliance of diamonds. Vasily had never been in their cottage, he had only passed by, but it was not his reproaches that she was afraid of. It was merely her insatiable desire to have everything around her bright, clean and lovely.

"Do go to bed," her mother would say, feeling sorry for her and casting a look of tacit sympathy out of the corner of her eye at Serafima's face which shone as if it had been sprayed with the juice of forest berries.

Serafima would shake her head and return her mother's look with one of those generous dazzling smiles she turned on the whole world these days.

"No," she would say, "I'm not tired."

Her mother never questioned her about anything but on those evenings when Serafima was out she had long and cautious talks with Myshniak.

"Don't you be forgetting me now, Dmitro," she would say to him with a shade of pity in her voice when they met in the street. "Come round this evening. You can chop some firewood for me or just sit and talk. Will you come?"

"I'll come," Myshniak would reply, dropping his eyes. He cherished a jealous sense of injury with the same care that he had taken with his bandaged arm. It grew within him, more intense as each day passed. But the

tenderness in the voice of Serafima's mother made his heart turn over and, concealing his sudden joy, he would go back to their cottage and sit for hours there taking a farewell look at the walls and the benches and Serafima's old shoes near the door....

"Marriage is God's work, Sonny," Serafima's mother Paraska said to him once, "but you two have grown up together like brother and sister. Who else can I ask?" And, drawing her face close to his, she said in an uneasy whisper, "That teacher.... Tell me, Dmitro dear, he won't do our Serafima any harm, will he? Is he a decent fellow?"

Myshniak flushed, he shifted unhappily on the bench, but noticing the tears that filled Paraska's eyes he could not but reply honestly. In a voice full of anguish, each word a burning coal, he said:

"Don't cry. He's a good man ... damn him!"

Once Serafima found Myshniak in the cottage when she came home. She showed no surprise and greeted him in a friendly voice: she wanted to be kind to everyone.

She was wearing a dyed leather jacket, worn out at the seams, and her boots were spattered with mud: she had been at the cattle farm, not at the school, Dmitro realized it at once, and that made him feel a little easier.

"Oh, I'm so hungry, Mummy," she said from the door in her ringing, happy voice. She was always ready to be happy, to laugh aloud as if she had nothing on her mind to be ashamed of. Dmitro sighed: what is to be done with a girl like that?

"Tell me, Dmitro, why is the tractor standing idle in the field behind the cemetery?" she asked before she had untied her kerchief. "It went to remove the stubble and stopped. Has it got pains in its legs?"

"It's not my tractor," Dmitro retorted with a good likeness of a frown. "My team's at Luchesy, you know that."

"What if I do? But why have you lost interest in Bolshany these days? Weren't you the first to go to the Agricultural Exhibition? I haven't been sent there yet. But I'll get there all right."

"I'll go and have a look at it right away," Myshniak mumbled submissively and rose from the bench.

"Sit down, I was only asking."

Dmitro dropped back only too readily on to his seat.

"Would you like to go to the pictures?" he asked after a while, taking heart.

Serafima shook her head.

"I have to be at the farm again at sunrise."

"But you've only just come from there," exclaimed Paraska, "Dunya Pevets took over from you. Why, for heaven's sake, can't you live like other folk?"

Her face was dark. I've stood a lot, it said, but.... Serafima lifted her brows with a suffering look and her gentle mischievous eyes glided away. Dmitro was on her side at once.

"Aunt Paraska," he exclaimed hotly. "If she must, she must."

Paraska made an impatient gesture.

"Then be off with you. It's high time Serafima was in bed. There's not much of the night left."

"I won't be a moment, Mummy, I just want a word with Dmitro."

Serafima spoke fast and breathlessly, almost with the same confiding air as in the old days.

"Since I've been put on to looking after first-calf cows there's no longer any question of reckoning the time or the work. I'm no slacker but I'm not so sure about my mate Dunya. Today I agreed with the chairman to check on the herdsman and find out where he's driving the herd for pasture. That's why I have to get up so early tomorrow," Serafima added with a touch of self-importance.

“With the chairman?”

“Uh-uh.”

“Well, well,” Dmitro thought to himself and sighed. “The chairman too. Oh, Serafima....”

Suddenly a new idea struck him: “Well, all I can say, you silly, is you’re going about things the wrong way.” He shouted so loudly that he woke up the cat curled on the bench. “My boys and girls over at Luchesy won’t have a moment’s peace from now on. You’re all on your own but we’ll set up a Komsomol post at the cattle farm. That’s the right way of doing things.”

Inspired by the thought, he sprang to his feet and made a familiar dashing gesture as if he were about to strike a chord on the accordion. Oh, but now he had no accordion. . . .

“Be off with you,” Paraska repeated sternly and bent over the lamp to blow out the flame.

Serafima worked these days with a fervour that spread to all her work-mates. It was really as though she was dashing ahead of them with a streaming banner.

At that time she rarely saw Vasily, but this did not worry her. He lived in the same world as she, what was more, he was there, beside her in Bolshany. What more did she need?

Once he met her in the beetroot field—for some reason he too had to come there.

“You’ve stopped coming to the school, Serafima,” he said with downcast eyes. “I know how busy you are....”

“Yes, I’m very busy,” she said, looking at him with clear eyes. “I’ll come.”

He bowed his fair head and went on his way and she stood a few moments quite still, her heart so full that she laid her hand to her breast to keep her feelings from splashing over its brim.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HARVEST FESTIVAL

1

A new man came to the district. His name was Dmitry Ivanovich Yakushonok.

Not long before his arrival, in early July, Kurilo, secretary of the regional Party committee, said to Klyucharev:

“You know, Fyodor Adrianovich, one of the main problems in our region just now is how to consolidate Soviet power locally. It somehow came about that we Party workers have taken everything on ourselves, all the administrative and management work. But it’s one thing for the Party to keep its eye on things and quite another to substitute itself for the authorities, here, there and everywhere. We overwork to the point of getting stomach ulcers, because we never have time to eat. But we never have time for what is our first duty—to educate people. Oh, you needn’t frown, I’m not referring to you. But it’s something we ought all to think about. By the way, how are you getting on with Pinchuk? No more rows?”

“N-no,” said Klyucharev vaguely.

Kurilo smiled ironically.

“H’m, and maybe it’s not so good that there are no rows?” He waited for an answer but when it was not forthcoming went on in a different tone: “Well, the long and the short of it is that you’re getting a new man. We’re recommending him for the post of chairman of the district executive committee. He’s young and energetic, he’s had eighteen months’ experience of work in a district Party committee and knows how to manage things.”

“What about Pinchuk?”

"I think we'll find plenty of work for Pinchuk in the district too. We're not intending to take him out of circulation yet, he's not made any particular mistakes. But we have to put the interests of the district above everything else. I think he'll take things the right way, he ought to understand being a Party member."

The news did not surprise Klyucharev but somehow he did not feel overpleased about it.

The irreconcilable attitude he had maintained towards Pinchuk during the early years had with the passage of time mellowed into a weary indifference. Pinchuk no longer put spokes into his wheels, in some things he was conscientiously helpful. More than that Klyucharev did not ask of him. Pinchuk had somehow fallen out of the circle of people whom Klyucharev was interested in. Klyucharev respected Lyubikov, he trusted Valyushitsky, Snezhko, even Blishchuk, but he had no respect for Pinchuk. In fact, in the way he silently "tolerated" him there was much contempt.

They lived within a stone's throw of each other, saw each other every day, often sat at the same platform table, but their lives flowed along different courses and never really met.

As for Pinchuk, though in his heart of hearts he was jarred by this tacit contempt of Klyucharev's, he consoled himself by the hypocritical thought that he was not after a No. 1 chair and felt quite all right in the background. Besides he still had occasional pangs of guilt about that letter he had written to the regional committee—it was so much like informing. Neither he nor Klyucharev ever mentioned it but neither had forgotten it.

And now this new man had come to Glubin, a man who had no previous connection either with Klyucharev or Pinchuk.

The first time Dmitry Yakushonok came into Klyucharev's office he met the latter's look openly and candidly.

Perhaps too openly and straightly, as if he were hanging out his sign--this is the sort of man I am, trust me!

No sooner had Klyucharev lent this arbitrary interpretation to the man's look than he felt he was being unfair to him, and this made him annoyed with himself. His mood was spoiled. For that or, perhaps, for some other reason Klyucharev regarded the newcomer with a prejudiced eye, though his appearance should have disposed him in his favour. For instance, he did not care for Yakushonok's build: he was taller than Klyucharev himself, very fair, with a sturdy, well-knit frame.

Yakushonok extended his hand with some restraint, as though waiting for the response. Klyucharev marked this and a concealed feeling of hostility led him to expect the man to take his hand limply but Yakushonok's hand turned out to be strong, hot, sunburned, with occasional big freckles and bleached hair on the back. His light curly hair, almost silver at the nape of his neck, his broad forehead overhanging his eyes, his direct and questioning glance--well, Klyucharev did not know whether he liked what he saw or not.

Now and again in the middle of a conversation Yakushonok would cock his right eyebrow slyly as if he meant to say, "Oh, really? Are you quite sure of that?" The most prominent feature of his face, however, was his mouth. Boldly etched, with a prominent upper lip, it was always closed in a firm line, even in moments of relaxation, and this lent the man an expression of energy, of constant readiness for struggle and tireless vigilance.

Yakushonok's voice was loud, ringing and insistent. Rather nasal in quality, it expressed self-confidence and high spirits. It was a voice you could not help listening to.

"H'm," thought Klyucharev, "he's not the patient sort. He's a man who finds it hard to keep quiet and wait. He'd be happy to get his hands on everything, I'm sure.

A bit too forthright, perhaps. Is it the mark of strong character, I wonder?"

Their first talk did not last more than half an hour. Yakushonok said that he was going to make a start by leaving the next day for a tour of the district; for the time being he would only be in his office to receive visitors twice a week. He seemed to have got everything carefully planned in advance. Klyucharev approved of that.

"I hope we hit it off," Yakushonok said as he rose to leave and shook hands again.

Klyucharev nodded with a curious sensation of relief, a very different feeling from the one he had started the interview with.

A few days later Klyucharev called a conference of newspaper subscription agents and the chairmen of village soviets to find out why the subscription campaign was lagging so badly. The second secretary was on holiday and Klyucharev had taken over propaganda work for a time.

Besides the agents and the chairmen an old postman attended the meeting—one of those who year after year go round the houses with clockwork precision, yearning in secret for a nice neat postman's uniform, the symbol of his important post. The younger generation was also represented, in the person of three merry-eyed girls with well-worn shoes; they could fly round the whole town in half an hour and before delivering the newspapers to subscribers knew all the contents by heart—so greatly did they thirst to know the big wide world.

The conference was already under way when the telephone rang shrilly at Klyucharev's elbow.

"I'm told you have a meeting of village soviet chairmen now?" asked Yakushonok. "And the subscription agents too? I see. What's the question under discussion?"

"Are you displeased about something?" asked Klyucharev, sensing something queer about the silence that followed his explanation.

"Yes, I am," Yakushonok replied after a slight pause. "I'm always displeased when people go to the wrong place. What on earth are we here for if you're going to handle even matters like that over the head of the district executive committee?" He was doing his best to restrain himself but his irritation was obvious.

For a moment Klyucharev felt the blood rush to his temples.

"The Party committee is never the wrong place to go to," he said breathing hard. But before he had completed the sentence he realized he ought not to have said it.

Yakushonok must also have felt that he had chosen the wrong tone.

For a few moments they both held on to the receivers without saying a word.

The pause dragged. There was silence in the office as all stared at Klyucharev.

"Please come over, Dmitry Ivanovich," said Klyucharev in a muffled voice. "Let's go into this question together, seeing I've got people already here in my office. The comrades are telling me a lot of very interesting things."

"Very well," said Yakushonok readily. "I'll come."

He sounded satisfied to have scored a point but generously ready to forget all and never mention it again. And there was something else too—something still half-hidden and nascent. Perhaps it was a feeling of respect for Klyucharev.

Klyucharev for his part was thinking: "They told me Yakushonok was touchy and proud. In my opinion he's simply young." As he saw this, his lost composure was completely restored to him, and that familiar sense of responsibility returned to him, a sense of responsibility not only for himself but for others, for Yakushonok too.

Despite the efforts Yakushonok made to keep in the background at first, stories about him were running through the district long before everyone had seen him

for himself. He was said to be a "nagger," one who liked to move by deeds rather than convince by words, in short, one of those uncomfortable people who are always right. Klyucharev did his bit by saying, half teasingly, in various places:

"Hasn't Yakushonok been to see you yet? No, I can tell he hasn't. You all look too fat and easy for that."

Or:

"That's not my business. You must see the chairman of the executive committee about it."

Glubin liked the way Yakushonok had stood up to the regional executive committee over the question of closing down their tottering little brick works and had managed in a short time to get the place running in such a way that it ceased to be a constant target for the local newspaper's criticism. That happened in the middle of August, less than a fortnight after Yakushonok's arrival at Glubin.

He drove to the brick works on a rainy, overcast day. A firing of bricks had just been removed from the kiln and the girls were shovelling sand in the trench from which the bricks had been taken. The roofed sand pit was soon full of hot dry dust. There was an acrid smell of burning in the air. The bricks were still warm and ruddy, and singed in places like bread taken out of the oven.

A number of lorries had been sent from various collective farms. The drivers were shouting and arguing among themselves about the order in which they should receive bricks.

Everyone was in a vile temper—the weather had upset the harvesting. Everyone wanted to make up for the time lost during this period of enforced idleness in the fields.

"But don't you understand? We've only another half wall to put up and then we're finished. What do you want us to do—to wait another month, until the wolves have moved into our shed?"

"You've got three walls finished. We haven't finished the first yet."

"Marusya, don't give him any bricks."

Marusya, a middle-aged woman, was trying to make out something written on a piece of crumpled paper. She was wearing heavy boots and was covered from head to foot with brown brick dust. She did not even look up when the men spoke to her. Occasionally she jerked her elbow wearily.

"Stand back, I'm telling you. What can I do? It's not me that decides, it's this paper."

"Haven't you ever tried to get away from the paper?" asked Yakushonok, edging up to her.

"Who are you?" Marusya gave him a sour look. Then she brightened up. "Yakushonok, are you? That's good. I was thinking of coming to see you myself. Everybody talks about Yakushonok.... Well, I said to myself, I'll go and see what sort of mug that animal's got on."

Yakushonok frowned with embarrassment. He suddenly looked very young and Marusya with innate feminine tact changed her tone:

"It doesn't make any difference who I give them to, Comrade chairman, they all need bricks. The whole district is building and there's only one brick works, that's the trouble."

"And they're bad bricks too," said the driver who was so anxious to get his fourth wall finished. He spoke bitterly. "By the time you get them unloaded half of them are smashed."

"Aye, they're rotten," the others put in readily.

"So that's why the regional committee has raised the question of closing down the works as unprofitable. I have to report on the matter tomorrow."

Yakushonok's words were met with general disapproval.

"Oh, they can't do that, Comrade chairman. They really can't. We need our own brick works."

Yakushonok walked thoughtfully round the works. He stopped near the press that cut the soft chocolate-coloured bricks like spongy dough. From there the bricks were taken off in wheelbarrows and piled under the penthouse or, on sunny days, in the open.

"Why aren't you using your other press?"

"We've got no drying space, Comrade Yakushonok," said the foreman who has arrived in a hurry.

Yakushonok put his hands over a beam in the penthouse roof and drew himself up: behind the piles of drying bricks there was a space like the bottom of a broad empty well. It was littered with lumps of dry clay.

The foreman stuck to his guns, shifting from foot to foot; of course, he said, he would fill in this space, he had overlooked it. All the same, that second press wouldn't work—they hadn't the conditions for it.

"And I say you have."

At length the foreman lost his temper:

"We're working according to the latest books. We get copies of the lectures by innovators. For instance, we charge the bricks by the Duvanov method...."

"But Duvanov's kiln gives fourteen thousand bricks a shift and your maximum is nine. In other words you charge by the Duvanov method but you bake by the ... Budarny method. Isn't that so, Comrade Budarny?"

Just before Yakushonok left the foreman asked him with unconcealed concern:

"Are you going to put in a good word for the works tomorrow?"

Yakushonok looked at him and replied gravely:

"I am. To me the situation is plain: it's a matter not only of shortage of labour, bad fuel and too long an interval between charging the kiln and removing the bricks. The main trouble is that the work is badly organ-

ized. But that's something that can be corrected. We certainly need our own brick works."

People also talked about the way Yakushonok, ten days later, went to the smithy at Dvortsy, where harvester were being repaired.

Kolkhoz chairman Valyushitsky threw his visitor distrustful glances as he took him through the village. By the look of him he might have been repeating to himself Marusya's words, "I'll see what sort of an animal he is."

Though Yakushonok detected something like that on his companion's face he showed no signs of displeasure.

He walked with his usual buoyant business-like stride and the fact that for once Valyushitsky did not complain about anything, leaving it to the new man to puzzle out things for himself, did not appear to worry him in the least either. Only once did his eyebrow shoot up quizzically as he stole a glance at Valyushitsky, a glance that seemed to ask, "Maybe we'll find a common language after all, comrade?"

They found the smithy beyond a high wall of standing rye. The place rang with the sound of hammers. For a hundred paces around the scent of grasses and ripe grain was mingled with that of tin, coal and charcoal fumes. The toothed harrows and wooden frames of the harvester completed the picture of this "industrial" island in the fields ready for the harvest. Yakushonok and Valyushitsky entered the smithy and greeted the workers loudly. The bellows puffed more slowly. The smith came up, holding a cap that was singed with sparks (the forge glowed amidst blue smoke in the corner).

"We're doing our job properly," he said with pent-up irritation. "We put everything in order. What happens afterwards, isn't our responsibility."

"What d'you mean? Not your responsibility? Surely you won't let your work be wasted?"

The village carpenter, hearing their voices, looked out of an annex. He showed Valyushitsky a sheet of plywood.

"They brought me this from the village soviet and said they needed a notice-board to put up harvest results. They said it's the most important thing now...."

Valyushitsky grew crimson with indignation.

"To hell with that! Harvest results are important? And what about the harvesters? One sunny day and the whole crop will fall flat. You should tell the village soviet to go to the—"

He suddenly looked at Yakushonok.

Yakushonok drew closer and stood swaying slightly.

"It's time for harvesting, is it?" he asked the carpenter.

"It is," the carpenter replied, scratching his head contritely.

"And what are you thinking of doing?"

"I don't know myself.... Either this board or the harvesters."

Yakushonok took the sheet of plywood in his strong freckled hands and dragged it aside on to a heap of shavings.

"The harvesters, comrade, only the harvesters."

2

The new kolkhoz office at Bratichi was built in such a way that the front and back windows were in one line. This meant you could see right through the building.

"Lyubikov isn't in at the moment," a collective farmer who happened to be passing told Yakushonok as he climbed the steps. "I think he's somewhere round the silage-cutter. Shall I ask one of the kids to show you the way?"

"I'll try and find him by myself if you just put me on my way."

As the man had said, Lyubikov was beside the silage-cutter. They shook hands to the accompaniment of such a desperate thumping of the machine that they could do no more than exchange smiles. Lyubikov's clothes and hair were smothered with fragrant bits of grass and the air whirled and fluttered like a green blizzard. It was drizzling and the grass smelled with a breath-taking fragrance.

"Wild stuff," shouted Lyubikov. "In the other trench we've got maize and Sudan grass."

They stepped aside and started talking as though picking up the thread of a conversation that had been broken off half an hour before. Unlike Valyushitsky, Lyubikov felt quite uninhibited with Yakushonok. He met his gaze calmly and cordially.

"What a pity I can't take you round the fields just now, Comrade Yakushonok. We have a board meeting today."

"We could use my car," Yakushonok suggested. "By the time people turn up...."

Lyubikov shook his head.

"Our people are punctual," he said simply. "Anyway, I must change and shave. I can't go looking like this." He patted his faded tunic which was bespattered with light drops of rain.

"Well, if you can't, you can't," said Yakushonok. He always liked a man to be master in his own house. "You mustn't put yourself out for me, comrade."

As Yakushonok was walking beside Lyubikov to the office, where he had left his car, he noticed among the allotments beyond the tall hemp a palisade of crosses. They were all exactly alike, twice the height of a man, massive objects that stood as close to each other as soldiers in line. Several of them, according to an old custom, were clothed in aprons so faded by the rain and

the snow that it was impossible to tell what their original colour might have been.

Through the fine drizzle Yakushonok's keen eye detected a number of human figures moving about under an old walnut-tree.

"What's happening over there?" he asked. "Are they burying someone?"

"No, it isn't that." Lyubikov scowled with disgust. "That old nuisance has arrived again, that's all."

"Who?"

"The priest. Kandyba. The women have been going from cottage to cottage all day collecting for him...."

"What have you done about it?"

"Me?" Lyubikov opened his eyes in surprise.

"What's your attitude to it, I'm asking?"

"What's it got to do with me? In our country religion—"

"Yes, I know. It's separated from the state. Let's walk over to them, Comrade Lyubikov."

Lyubikov hesitated.

"I don't know, Dmitry Ivanovich. Maybe they're holding a service or something."

"Well, what does it matter? We're not bringing the militia with us, are we? Anyway, who runs this place? Kandyba or us? The chairman of the executive committee has a right to be interested in everything that's going on in his district." Yakushonok's eyebrow suddenly shot up. "What is it? Are you afraid of that priest?"

The taunt stung. Lyubikov clenched his teeth, sniffed like a little boy and plunged ahead, his boots leaving deep marks in the glutinous mud.

Yakushonok trod carefully in his footsteps, smiling to himself and taking pains not to soil his boots. He was generally rather careful about his appearance.

Father Kandyba had had his eye on them for some

time but had not interrupted his business: he slowly raised and lowered a tarnished dripping cross. He looked a lonely pitiful figure shrinking in the wind.

• "He might at least stand under the tree," said Yakushonok suddenly. "At his age...."

Lyubikov turned in surprise: Yakushonok seemed to have lost all his militant spirit. He was walking slowly and very calmly. They stopped about ten paces from the walnut-tree.

The little group of worshippers regarded them in curious and circumspect silence. After lingering a bit—for appearance's sake—Kandyba also turned and looked at them inquiringly. His eyes met Yakushonok's. And like Klyucharev before him, Yakushonok thought to himself, "This man is still strong."

"Good day to you all," said Yakushonok, and his greeting did not exclude Kandyba. "I am the chairman of the district executive committee. I've come to find out how you're getting on. Perhaps some of you have any questions to ask me?"

He turned politely to Kandyba.

"Excuse me, I don't want to interfere. If you don't object, Comrade Lyubikov and I will wait till you've finished and meanwhile discuss one or two things between ourselves." He spoke in a lower tone but loud enough for the people who stood nearest to them to hear quite distinctly: "As I was saying to Comrade Lyubikov, I'm interested in the building question. Now, about those building credits, has everyone who put in an application got one? And have you had all the timber and roofing material you ordered? Any complaints?"

Perhaps for the first time in his life Father Kandyba felt at a loss. There was not a hint of hostility in Yakushonok's manner—on the contrary, he seemed friendly and business-like, quietly aware of his authority. Everyone was involuntarily drawn to him. Father Kandyba

saw a metamorphosis take place under his very eyes: in the most natural way his flock left off their ardent prayers for mundane matters. Their faces sprang to life.

For the first few minutes they kept glancing back at the priest. Evidently they felt slightly uneasy; but the matter under discussion was so vitally important for them! The women were the first to take the plunge into secular cares.

"Comrade chairman, we've heard they've sent only two wagon-loads of roofing for the whole district. They'll give it out for farm buildings again. I'm a widow with children. I've got nothing to roof my cottage with. Won't you help me, please?"

"My credit was postponed till next year. Is that according to the law?"

Yakushonok raised his arms.

"Just a moment, comrades, not all at once. What's your name? Anastasia Gurko? Well, I can tell you, Comrade Gurko, there'll be another delivery of roofing material in a month's time. We haven't used up all our allocation yet. Of course, we can't wrong the kolkhozes but for me you're all equal, it's my duty to protect the interests of every citizen. As to who comes first that's something for the village soviet and the district executive committee to decide.... Just a minute! Excuse me," he said, turning again to the priest though the man had not spoken. "There's another question I'm interested in, comrades...."

It had stopped raining. A warm mist rose from the ground. The gilt cross in Father Kandyba's numbed blue hand was filmed over with damp. Yakushonok glanced at the old man and broke off abruptly.

"Don't you think it would be better, comrades, if we all got together in the village soviet? Why should we get soaked out here in the rain? Anyway, we're disturbing the priest. By the way, what are you all doing here?"

"We're praying for fine weather, son," an old woman explained confidentially and fervently made a sign of the cross at the grey sky.

"We've come to the end of our patience," the men murmured guiltily. "The harvest this year is one of the best we've had for a long time but we just can't get it in. Any moment the grain may begin to sprout. We can't use the combine because the grain's too wet. Nor the harvesters either. Not that we've got many of them."

"There are another six under repair in the smithy," said Lyubikov who had been listening in silence till that moment. He turned vexedly to Yakushonok: "You see what it all comes to, Dmitry Ivanovich. Of course it's right to go all out for mechanization. But there's not a single factory making harvesters in these parts. We're using the old ones we've collected from the individual farmsteads. That's not the right way to manage things. We ought to have a stock of sickles too—what are we going to do if the rye falls? There's nothing to be ashamed of in using sickles. Our aim is to gather the entire crop and if a man is to be a real commander, then he's got to be able to adapt himself to all conditions."

Yakushonok raised his head and looked gloomily at the overcast sky.

"All the same, what can we do in a weather like this?"

"Nothing at all," said Skulovets angrily. He too was there, hiding himself sheepishly behind the backs of the others. But the conversation had touched a sore spot and he pushed his way forward. "Until the weather mends we can't do anything."

"But what if it doesn't mend? We've got to reckon on the worst happening."

"That's what you say, Comrade chairman, but last spring we had some folk here from the Academy and they argued differently. 'Why do you think there'll be rains and your hay will necessarily rot?' they asked us.

Remember, Alexei Tikhonovich? (Lyubikov nodded and smiled wryly.) No, they said, you must plan getting it in nice and quick. Well, there are their plans for you, all drawn up in expectation of the sun shining the year round. But our fields haven't got a roof over 'em. They lie under the sky. What d'you think, Comrade chairman?"

"I think that as we depend on the weather we've got to be realistic, of course. . . . All the same, comrades, what are we going to do about the harvest? I came down here specially to talk it over with you. What shall we do, what am I to say to all our kolkhozes in the district? We can't lose the grain."

The rain came pelting down again.

The men pulled their caps over their eyes and grimly felt for their tobacco pouches. The women closed in a tight ring and looked at Yakushonok and Skulovets uneasily.

The old woman who had started the conversation with Yakushonok raised herself on her toes and grasped the wet trunk of a willow sapling with a knotty hand.

"Well now, tell me, what are we going to do?"

Yakushonok wiped his wet face with a handkerchief.

Skulovets said nothing for a time. Then he began, harshly:

"We've got to get it in, that's all. We've got to use every minute, every hour. We ought to station someone by every stood and the moment there's a break in the rain we ought to loosen the sheaves so that the wind can blow through and dry them—and then get them away to the thresher. They're now accepting grain at the elevator with higher moisture than before. They're meeting us on that."

"Aye, we need to work as though we were putting out a fire," voices came to support him from the crowd. "You're right, we've got to save the harvest."

People began to stir impatiently.

There and then Skulovets started discussing details with Lyubikov.

“Listen, chairman, let’s make an announcement by radio and get everybody to the office—the milkmaids, the folk at the piggery, school children....”

Yakushonok held out his hand to him. He was smiling.

“That’s just the thing. All out for the harvest!”

He swung round and made to leave. Then as though recalling something he stopped and stole a glance at the priest.

“And when does your prayer plan to give us sunshine?” he asked gravely.

“Next week, on Transfiguration Day, my dove,” volunteered the old woman, flattered by the gravity of the question. Father Kandyba said nothing.

“When’s that? The nineteenth?”

Yakushonok shook his head slowly.

“No, father,” he said, addressing the priest directly. “We got a weather forecast today: we shall have bad weather until the 5th of September. But we’ll get the harvest in all the same.”

At the elevator the grain dust was so thick that they had to keep the lights burning during the daytime. The mountains of rye shone with a faint gleam. High up under the girders Yakushonok stood, deafened by the roar of the machinery. He stood knee-deep in grain and the heady odour of the rye made him feel dizzy. He was smothered in dust and his legs sank so deep into the grain that he could hardly pull them out. Hungrily he fingered the grain, plunging his arms into it up to the elbow or even to the shoulder.

Farther down the heap stood Ulitsky, the manager of the grain delivery office. And at the very foot waited the trim little figure of a grey-haired old man from the dis-

trict planning department whom Yakushonok had brought with him. The old man too was eagerly fingering the grain, even nibbling some of it with his teeth.

"It's heating up," Ulitsky said dejectedly when Yakushonok at last came down. "Now that they were allowed to deliver it damp they never give a thought to drying it. It's more than the elevator can manage to take in and dry."

"Who are 'they'?" Yakushonok asked him. He had difficulty in hearing over the rattle of the machinery and kept looking around with delighted eyes as though he were unable to tear his gaze from those mountains of rye.

"The kolkhozes, of course."

Yakushonok's lips set in a tight line. A stern and distant look flashed across his face.

"What do you suggest we should do?"

"There's only one thing to do, Dmitry Ivanovich: let the kolkhozes dry it themselves. They managed all right in previous years."

"You mean we ought to slow down the intake of grain?"

Ulitsky shrugged. He looked dissatisfied.

"You are right to say there's only one thing to do," Yakushonok said calmly. "But it's not what you propose. The elevator can dry thirty tons a day and they're bringing us eighty, aren't they? That means we've got to use all the accessible space in the town. We'll have to dry it in the open and in every shed we can find. But you'll go on accepting everything they bring, understand? Is that quite clear?"

When they were driving back from the elevator he turned to his companion and said, a note of irritation still in his voice:

"They have got into the habit of thinking that the kolkhozes exist for them and not they for the kolkhozes.

What happened in the past? The chairman would bring in the grain and they'd find the damp coefficient was 19.1. Back it would have to go. The poor chairman would come to the district Party committee, to the executive committee and plead: 'Help me, brothers. It's only one-tenth of one per cent above the limit.' But Ulitsky doesn't understand that he and his elevator are not a sovereign state and that he's taking in grain not for the sake of the grain itself but for the welfare of the people—the common purpose of all of us."

"Narrow local interests," the old man said, frowning mildly.

This stock phrase was so apt here that Yakushonok in his surprise looked at his companion with something approaching friendliness.

3

Antonina met Yakushonok the first time when she was walking on the road. For once the weather was fine: the sun came out, and from early morning everyone was out in the fields.

Whether she was early or late to bed, called out in the night or allowed to sleep undisturbed, Antonina's working day always began at six a.m.

That morning the sun greeted her with cool slanting rays that were like golden lashes. She felt elated as though the sun had made her a present.

"Kanya!" she called to the nurse, leaning out of the window and clutching her night-gown to her breast. "Anyone in the waiting-room yet?"

"No, Antonina Andreyevna. Everyone's giving their illnesses a rest today. If you'd only let me off I'd take my sickle and be off harvesting myself."

With a laugh the nurse gathered up her skirt to avoid its touching the damp grass and dashed with clanging buckets to the well.

Her gaiety infected Antonina. Half-dressed, her hair pinned up at the nape of her neck, she tried on before the mirror a pretty green dress she had had made three years before. Then she put it back on the hanger and began to tidy the room. It was a small room, yet it looked depressingly empty with its hospital bed and white bedside table with a hand mirror and unopened bottle of scent on it, its two chairs at an oilcloth-covered plank table with crossed legs. A good half of the table was taken up with piles of books; the rest held a sugar-bowl, a few plates and two glasses standing on odd saucers: one of the glasses was Antonina's own, the other was for visitors. That one was dusty.

"I ought to wash it all out," thought Antonina. "I ought to buy new cups and a table-cloth and a bookshelf. I don't suppose I'd find a bookshelf in Glubin. But it's a long time since I've been in the shops...."

"Antonina Andreyevna! They've brought a patient from Bolshany," Kanya called through the window, then, turning to someone, she said consolingly: "Don't cry, auntie, we'll give your little daughter an injection right away and a few drops and a powder too. She'll live a long time yet, you needn't worry."

There really were very few patients that day. Antonina soon finished with those who came to the consulting-room and set off round the wards. During the two years she had spent in charge of the village dispensary she had grown accustomed to doing everything herself: treating eye and ear diseases, attending confinements, mending fractured limbs, even handling the terrifying surgical instruments in cases where it was not possible to send the patient to Glubin. She knew every path for twenty-five kilometres around, knew which of them were

impassable in the autumn and where in winter to expect snowdrifts up to the horse's belly.

And these paths were always being trodden ever harder as people headed in increasing numbers for Luchesy, the paths that joined in a road that led to the log building of the little hospital, right to the doctor's own window.

At Luchesy, Antonina was "first aid" and "visiting doctor" and hospital interne and sanitary inspector and hygiene propagandist—all in one. She lectured at the school and at a session of the district soviet, gave it hot to the chairmen of two adjacent kolkhozes—Bolshany and Luchesy—who found it impossible to define their "spheres of influence," with the result that she often had to go to Klyucharev himself over such matters as cleaning a well, getting a farmyard cleared or mending the hospital garden fence.

The day which began for her with the flutter of golden eyelashes on the window-pane remained just as sunny till evening.

Antonina had been to call on a patient. Her way took her through the deserted village. She had looked in on one of the teams in the field and was now on her way back to hospital. She had to walk a lot but she liked it.

When you walk along country roads like these with your arms swinging steadily and the feel of the warm springy earth underfoot, kind, good thoughts come into your mind.

On each side of the well-trodden road tufts of fox-tail swayed in the wind looking exactly like the real thing. The aftergrass of the first mowing was growing fast after the rain and casting its sweet scent all around. Alfalfa, sown a second time, spread a tender lilac cover over the fields. And then the road plunged into the woods where a deep murmur of leaves filled the air. Maple- and birch-trees stood in close palisade at the edge of the

woods, pine-trees ran mischievously up the slopes. At sunrise and sunset the tops of their trunks glowed with an orange light, like lighthouses.

You have to take only a few steps off the road to see nimble sharp-nosed squirrels waving their tails. They make resonant clicking sounds and spring fearlessly from bough to bough. Here the ground is thickly spread with bluebells; entire broods of mushrooms grow right on the paths—you may stumble over them if you don't look. And in the round glades verdant young pine-trees sit like green hedgehogs. When the sun breaks through everything around glitters and sparkles; on overcast days a cool silence reigns around. You pass through the woods and go up a slope, plunge into fields of grain and then you are already on the pink clay road that takes you into the village.

The throb of a motor-car engine reached Antonina's ears from afar. She looked back and watched the car come up. Could it be Klyucharev, she wondered? Hardly. At this moment she did not want anyone to disturb her solitude. She went on walking without turning round any more, keeping the same even pace, but drew a little to the side of the road.

The car overtook her at a place where there was a deep pot-hole in the road, and this made the driver apply the brakes.

He was one of the district executive committee drivers and he recognized Antonina and greeted her. She responded with a slight nod.

"Like a lift?" the driver asked.

"Where are you going?"

"To Bolshany."

Antonina shook her head. Next to the driver a young man with very fair hair sat stiffly. He too looked at Antonina and as he did so a faint flash not so much of in-

terest as of an effort to remember something showed in his eyes.

The car jerked forward.

"Who was that?" Yakushonok asked a little later.

"The doctor from Luchesy, Antonina Andreyevna Lukashevich."

Yakushonok recollected that besides being doctor Antonina was a deputy of the district soviet. As there was to be a meeting the following week he ought to have talked to her. He turned but the car had covered a good deal of ground since they had overtaken Antonina. "A pity we didn't stop," Yakushonok reflected and now he felt a purely masculine interest, a passing feeling of vexation that he had not even looked at her properly.

All he could remember was an uncovered head with dark, rather untidy hair—as though the breeze on the road had got caught in it—and a green dress which the wind drew tightly against her soft shoulders and high breasts. She probably had very dark eyelashes: there had been something smouldering, something like glowing charcoal in her look.

This brief encounter on the road did not leave Antonina unimpressed. She had noticed Yakushonok look back and for a few moments had stood on the road clearly outlined in the low beams of the setting sun, against the warm coral of the rye which rose as high as her waist.

The road took a sharp bend before reaching Luchesy and from there on the grain was head-high about her. She walked at the same pace as before but now she was looking at herself from outside, through his eyes, and that seemed strange to her. She too, like the whole district, must have unconsciously fallen under the spell of the countless stories about the dashing energy of that man who had stood up even to Klyucharev over some things (the people of Glubin themselves had not made

up their minds whether it was something to be laughed at or admired).

"We'll see, we'll see what this Yakushonok is like," Antonina said to herself casually.

She had an urgent matter to discuss with the man: she had to consult him about the way to use the hospital funds.

However, when she called on him in Glubin, Yakushonok was out of town, spinning along the roads at the other end of the district.

From that day on Antonina began to listen with special attention to all the idle talk about the new chairman of the district executive committee. It would not have been like her to question people about him, but occasionally she dropped a word or two to prevent the conversation from lagging. She wanted to see the man for herself and take a good look at him and in her mind she had already prepared herself carefully for their next meeting. It never occurred to her that he might have failed to notice her altogether that time on the road.

4

They met again a few days later. Late one afternoon Antonina saw Yakushonok's car drive through Luchesy leaving a faint trail of dust dancing in the sun.

The village street ran gently down to the village soviet where an old rowan-tree waved its red bunches of berries welcomingly to newcomers as though putting out little flags to celebrate the occasion.

After a while Antonina went out on to the porch.

On the low roofs of the sheds yellow pumpkins lay ripening. Bundles of poppies pulled up with the roots lay with their hard brown heads under the gables. Milk jars hung on the fences. It was a dear familiar world.

Antonina tossed the ends of her light scarf over her shoulders and walked slowly down to the village soviet. She was wearing her green frock.

At the village soviet several collective farmers had been invited to come for a talk. They were those who, though considered members of the kolkhoz, contributed no work and lived off their own private small holdings.

"I don't need any dead souls," said chairman Grom hotly. "I'll get rid of them in two ticks."

Yakushonok gave him time to let off steam.

Grom was almost twice his age. He had come to the Glubin District in the previous spring from a large town where for many years he had been in charge of an important office (his wife was still living in town looking after the flat).

Naturally, Grom would like very much to return to his family and to town life he was accustomed to. But he was the sort of man who could never give only half of himself to anything. And having taken on his shoulders the weak Luchesy kolkhoz, he was pulling it up with many a puff and a pant, and with a curse for all around.

There were times when he seemed to recall his situation and then he would lament in the district Party committee:

"D'you think I understand a thing about agriculture, brothers? I can't tell wheat from rye.... Oh, this asthma will be the death of me!"

"He's a repulsive character," Yakushonok, usually so reserved in his opinions, once said of him, screwing up his face with disgust. He had met Grom for the first time when the latter was in one of his whining moods.

But on hearing this, Klyucharev had suddenly broken into light friendly laughter.

"What are you saying? Why, he's a real treasure. If tomorrow I was suddenly told to entrust the whole dis-

trict and my safe to someone else I'd go and get him out of bed and say, 'Danila Semyonovich, here's something you've got to do.' You shouldn't take all he says seriously. He's just putting on a show. D'you really think he can't tell wheat from rye? Why, he's filled five notebooks with his observations on farming, I've seen them with my own eyes. He's off like a retriever after anything interesting and as soon as he hears something new he makes a note of it right away. Snezhko over at Bolshany was the first to start milking cows after their first calving but I'll tell you this—it'll be Grom of Luchesy who gets the best results.

"They have an old herdsman there. There was one cow that'd had her first calf. They had so much trouble with her all the district knew. She wouldn't let anyone come near her, went for one and all headlong with her horns. The milk had rushed to her head, they call it, and it was as good as lost. But that old man quietened her. Now, they say, she's got the makings of a record-beater. Then the calves sickened over at Luchesy. 'Don't worry,' said that old man, 'let me have 'em. I promise you won't lose one of them.' And he took them all and cured 'em. Grom dotes on that old man, sets him up above all your academicians.... 'Terenty Semyonovich Maltsev, the Siberian wizard, for the fields,' he says, 'and Gavril Stepanovich Chudal for cattle-breeding. With the methods of those two we'll show you great things.'

"Haven't you noticed sometimes, Dmitry Ivanovich, that some qualities in people that are very unpleasant in everyday life can come in useful for society? For instance, there are people who are always sticking their noses into other folks' business. We have a vet like that, Abram Lvovich Perchik—you know him, of course. Well, he goes off to a kolkhoz to treat a pig and comes back with revelations about embezzlements in the bookkeeper's office. Or another man is stingy and overcareful with his mon-

ey: in his own home he watches what his wife puts into the soup and reckons up every kopek she spends, but at work he saves the state a million. There's only one vice I can't stand and that's indifference. All others can be turned to good account, that's my opinion."

Sitting in the Luchesy village soviet, Yakushonok let Grom go on talking. He watched him curiously through half-closed eyes. At length he said:

"But you're wrong, you know, Danila Semyonovich."

Grom stumbled over an unfinished phrase. Under the lids inflamed from sleeplessness his eyes flashed a challenge.

"Well, I'd like to hear you prove it."

"It's very simple. You still have the psychology of an office worker: if you don't like one of your staff you can get rid of him and take on another. But you can't get rid of people in a kolkhoz and no one will give you another to replace him. A kolkhoz is not an office, it's where people live, and in a kolkhoz the members, not us, are running the place. If you start calling people names like saboteur or traitor or talk about subversive activities or distorting the Party line, then tell me—who are you going to have left to work with? Before long you'll have two categories of people: the pure and the impure. And what are you going to do then with the impure? And who of us is pure in the eyes of God and faultless in the eyes of the kolkhoz chairman? That's how it is, Danila Semyonovich."

"Uh-uh," said Grom. "Convincing. Very. But how am I going to talk to these unconscientious slackers? You tell me that. I can give you one example. We have an old woman here called Avdotya Pevets (she's my age, incidentally). Well, we don't ask her to do anything. She can only just manage to deal with her own garden. But now her son's back from the army. A great strapping fellow. He lives at home, makes use of the place all

round, but doesn't want to work in the kolkhoz. Prefers to spend his time in town. And that when we in Luchesy need every man we can get hold of. This isn't Bolshany. We're not millionaires. Well, can you teach me how to deal with him?"

"I'm too young here to be teaching you, Danila Semyonovich," said Yakushonok guardedly. "But I'll try and talk to Pevets."

Antonina entered the office in the middle of this conversation. She greeted Yakushonok with a reserved nod and went over to the window. The gauze curtain swaying lightly in the wind practically hid her. Over her shoulder she heard Yakushonok talking to the collective farmers. Although he was seeing these people for the first time in his life he adopted the right tone with every one as though he guessed which of them was being foxy, pretending to be this and that, though, as Antonina well knew, the fellow was really a lazy, foolish nonentity; while in another with a meek voice and a shy manner Yakushonok saw something promising, with the result that the fellow would leave the village soviet with a job to do, nothing very complicated, nothing that any half-educated Polesian could not have done, but—who knows?—perhaps it would turn out to be the first rung on the ladder to some important and responsible task. Wasn't it said that a man does not know whether he can sing until he tries?

The chairman of the village soviet merely shook his head doubtfully, giving, however, no clearer indication of his disagreement with the new district authority.

Antonina realized that she did not know Yakushonok's first name.

"Judge for yourself, Dmitry Ivanovich...."

Ah, it was Dmitry!

She watched him covertly. How did he differ from Klyucharev? Was his a calmer nature? Or more reserved? No, it wasn't that.

There are people who can be convinced by the logic of reason, by concepts sown in their minds like seeds. But there are others who are more spontaneous and who are more readily influenced by the living example. Every thought accomplished cuts a deep furrow in their minds. In the same way that in her youth the old doctor Vitaly Nikodimovich had represented an ideal for her, now Antonina had for some time made Klyucharev the embodiment of perfection. And the more convinced she grew of her own lack of ideal qualities the more valuable and indispensable she felt them to be. But now Yakushonok had come on the scene, and he was a man quite different from Klyucharev; yet there was something about him too that sparked her imagination though at this stage she did not clearly see where her interest sprang from.

She raised her eyes thoughtfully. Unexpectedly they met Yakushonok's. Now, though, his look wasn't one of casual interest as it had been on the road. It held a restrained, newly aroused warmth. Of that Antonina was sure.

"If I'm not mistaken you were the secretary at the last district soviet meeting," he said to her. "I've been looking through the minutes."

"Yes, I was."

Her lips set in a tight line. She suddenly withdrew into herself.

A puzzled bewildered look came into Yakushonok's eyes. But Antonina remained frozen.

"You must have had a lot of work. The meeting ran on for two days," he said gently.

Antonina shrugged.

"Work? Why, everything was written for me in advance."

And reading the frank surprise on his face Antonina went on in a slightly higher tone.

Well, she said, there was a comedy known as A District Soviet Meeting, author one Pinchuk. Didn't he know that? The whole proceedings were worked out in advance and typed out. Not only the main speeches but even the interruptions from the floor. She knew passages off by heart—Chairman: "Any questions?" Voice from the floor: "No."

"But what if someone actually did ask a question?" muttered Yakushonok.

There was so much sincere hurt and indignation in the look she gave him that he forgave her the belated sarcasm. He had felt like saying, "You played your part in the comedy too, didn't you?" But he refrained.

"It won't be that way in future," he said instead.

Antonina fell silent. She suddenly felt ashamed of herself for having laid the responsibility on a newcomer—having herself lived in the district for over two years. But he did not reproach her. He took the responsibility for the past on his shoulders as naturally as he took that for the future.

"There's a meeting scheduled for next week, isn't there?" Antonina enquired with a timidity that surprised her. "What's on the agenda?"

She felt a sudden urge to give him her hand in silent repentance, to convey to him a promise that in the future she would act quite differently.

Yakushonok gave her a keen look. His expression changed again rapidly, elusively. He was friendly, confidential.

"Oh, the usual items, Antonina Andreyevna—questions concerning the district economy," he said. "I haven't thought of anything new yet. Have you been long in this district?" he asked her after a slight pause, moving a little nearer as though the better to hear her reply.

"Over two years. And you're here for the first time, aren't you? Is there nobody here you knew before?"

"No one. All I knew was that there was a place on the map called Glubin, that's all."

He spread his arms in a light-hearted gesture that revealed a certain embarrassment, an inner constraint that Antonina detected at once.

However, he seemed to be in no hurry to turn the conversation to more practical topics: his constraint, evidently, was not so very unpleasant to him.

"Well, how do you like it here?" Antonina was peculiarly happy to associate herself with the district.

She had always felt that she lived a closed and isolated life, interested only in her own job, but now she discovered that she was well acquainted with all local matters and could talk about them as well as anyone else.

"Perhaps the high district authority would deign to visit my little hospital?" she proposed gaily, in a discreet and cautious attempt to test the limit of her powers.

"I'm sorry, I can't manage it this time," said Yakushonok, shaking his head with obvious regret. Then seeing Antonina's brows rise in disconcerted surprise, he explained falteringly: "You see, I was not telling the exact truth when I told you that I had no friends in Glubin. As a matter of fact, I must be there this evening."

"On business?"

"Not exactly.... I have to call on a woman."

Antonina's hands moved involuntarily, hesitating between the ends of her scarf which hung loose on her shoulders, the thin well-gnawed school pen and a crumpled sheet of paper lying on the table beside a safety ink-pot.

"I need your advice about the hospital funds," she said in a strained tone. "I thought it would be better if

you saw the place yourself. But I can put it all in writing."

"Yes, of course. I understand. You are quite right," Yakushonok said hastily. "But I simply can't manage it. This is an anniversary, you see, one I've got to observe." He suddenly dropped his eyes, shy as men usually are of showing any sentimentality which they fear more than fire. "The mother of one of my old army mates lives at Glubin. That's the whole story. I used to write to her every year on this date. Of course it's nothing—I can't take his place for her. I never even speak to her of that. But I must go and sit with her this evening."

"Yes," said Antonina very quietly, "you must."

Something in her voice surprised him. There was a question in his eyes, as he continued:

"So you're not offended, are you? They told me you came to Glubin and missed me. And now things have worked out the wrong way again."

Antonina smiled that rare deep-set smile of hers.

"Yes, go, you must go," was all she said.

She was the first to leave. When she reached the door she turned as though intending to say something more and once again their eyes met. Had he been watching her all the time? When two people look each other in the eyes like that what do they see?

Back at home Antonina opened the door which she always bolted when she was going to be out for any length of time and walked to the middle of the room. There she stood reflecting.

The autumn equinox would soon be on them but the glow of the sunset still warmed the sky every day. Antonina did not light the lamp—she wanted to preserve the illusion of a day without end. She had a feeling that with Yakushonok's departure something had snapped,

and now she did not know how to pick up the thread of her life.

“Anything happened while I was out? Did anyone ask for me?” she called to Kanya with a vague hope that some minor care would arise to save her from an evening of loneliness.

“No, nothing,” Kanya replied carelessly.

Kanya’s full name was Katerina and at first Antonina kept wanting to call her Katya or Katyusha, but that would not have been in the local manner and gradually she grew accustomed to the unusual diminutive as one does to many things in a strange life till they become habits.

“Well, I’m leaving,” said Kanya, appearing at the window. She was all dressed up for an outing: in a white blouse and a bodice embroidered with big yellow flowers, a lace apron below which her tireless sunburned legs showed. “You said you wanted to do some ironing. I’ve left some charcoal on the stove.”

At last Antonina had to light the lamp. The day vanished and the blind night slid up to the window. She placed some glowing charcoal into an iron with a chipped latch and at once all the holes in the top glowed with cinnabar light, like little round windows in a warm strange house.

For a few moments Antonina sat in silent reverie in front of the iron. Then she felt a sudden surge of energy. She swiftly removed from the table the dishes and books, placing them all on the chairs, covered the table with a baize blanket over which she laid a lace-edged sheet, scooped a glass of water from the bucket in order to spray the cloth and began to iron everything in turn: kerchiefs and shawls, long-forgotten dresses and blouses, a pretty satin skirt in which, according to Chernenko, the local lady-killer, she looked like a black rose, her doctor’s smock for the next day, smelling of

medicine and river-water. She ironed with a zest, humming to herself, which was something she did but rarely, and then glancing round now and again to make certain no one was within earshot, for she considered she had no voice at all.

And so, it seemed, an evening which had at first frightened her with a prospect of loneliness began to unfold peacefully. But suddenly Antonina held the iron over a fold struck by the thought that she might have to wear and soil all these garments many a time before she saw Yakushonok again.

The warm sickly smell of scorched viscose brought her out of her reverie. The room was so still that she could hear quite distinctly the sound of the wick sadly sucking up kerosene in the lamp. Moths fluttered in the gauze curtain. The iron was cooling on top of a sweet tin, the charcoal purring within it.

Antonina shook her head and started hanging her dresses on the wall. The dresses were still warm from the iron as she wrapped each one in a dust sheet, as tenderly as if she were dressing a child. She had hardly noticed her thoughts taking another course. She went on whispering a few bitter, unhappy phrases as if to punish herself but there was a playful dreamy smile on her lips as she sat down in front of the looking-glass and let her thick dark auburn hair fall over her shoulders; she combed it, enjoying the soft cool feel of it on her skin. And for the first time she remembered without the slightest bitterness how ten years before at good moments of their life together Orehov had buried his face in her tresses.

Later, when she was in bed, her palm tucked cosily under her cheek, her thoughts turned back to Yakushonok. She recalled word by word everything that he had said in her presence that day, everything, even his manner of speaking. She was pleased to think they had some

qualities in common—that inner reserve which expressed itself in the sparingness of his gestures, the attentiveness of his slightly ironic glance, the proud fear of making a mistake—which made him keep quiet sometimes and bide his time, difficult as it was for him to do so—and finally, his way of biting his lower lip stubbornly if a “matter of principle” was under discussion. Antonina who felt herself guilty of the same fault now noticed the amusing side of it. She laughed to herself as she lay in bed. But in that laugh there was something very gentle, accepting and forgiving.

What a strange thing the human heart is! It absorbs everything around it but it does not respond to everything. Somewhere locked behind seven seals lie unspent emotions, awaiting their moment. Experience of life, sometimes bitter, always circumspect, mounts watchful guard over them. “Wait, wait,” it says. “Don’t make a mistake.”

“Very well, I shall wait,” we reply obediently and often pass on, fighting down the prompting of our beating heart.

Is experience right when it tries to draw with compass and rule such intangible concepts as love, hate and happiness? Maybe yes, maybe no. . . . The trouble is that different people have different experiences. It may be based on the fact that once someone hurt you. And, gradually collecting all the little kicks and pricks of life, experience lays them before you like a manual and counsels: “Be prudent, be cautious, be distrustful—and you will have a quiet life.”

But there is experience of another sort, that which in the most difficult life stores in the memory the warm sunny beams to which it is always worth while to turn. Kind words spoken to you perhaps quite casually. The hand of a friend extended to you in greeting.

We call each other "comrade." Forget those times—that happens too—when the word sounded stale and indifferent. But remember, remember well, the occasions when it stopped you short and made you turn back to some difficult place and work regardless of the effort, expecting no reward.

For a long time the unhappy story in Antonina's past made her tighten her lips in distrust and shun those who might have been her friends.

"I work well. What more can anyone ask of me?" she seemed to be forcing through those tight-closed lips.

But that is not enough for us, Antonina!

One has to know how to do many things in life. One must know how not to be alone. Life is not very long, of course. And in our land, at least, there are things innumerable to do. But all those things that we do not manage to experience, to see or live through will be struck off the sum total of our existence. No, there is no sense in being faint-heartedly cautious. Otherwise we'll waste our life without getting really to know ourselves. And then half our being, perhaps the better half, will lie dormant, unused, of no use to oneself or to others.

After all, we have been building the Soviet state giving the whole of ourselves.

5

Klyucharev and Yakushonok really were different types in many respects. However much two men may share the same principles they can never be quite alike and if they reach the same result it will be by different roads. Yakushonok never tried to educate people singly. He did not have Klyucharev's partiality for heart-to-heart talks in which Klyucharev as it were gave a piece of his own heart to the other. For Klyucharev every intonation of

his voice was important, every expression of his face, every word spoken or left unspoken. Yakushonok on the other hand went straight to the point.

Yakushonok liked to work together with other people, in big groups. He found the conferences of the district executive committee fascinating: he liked to see characters clash and liked taking part in a clash. He was gay, inquisitive, resourceful; his field of work extended far beyond the top of his desk.

And if Klyucharev might be said to be the educator of souls, the one who prepared them by turning over the virgin soil of the conscience and casting the seed, Yakushonok was the one who went into the fields with the hum of machinery—and started the harvest.

Klyucharev was an exceedingly impressionable man and was often rather sharp; some people he liked, others disliked. He would fight for someone whom everyone else was against and he was not afraid to be in a minority of one in expressing his contempt for another. He had no standard approach to people. To him the population of the district—forty thousand—meant first of all forty thousand individuals, each one of whom interested him intensely.

But Yakushonok preferred to think in terms of the district as a whole. He was more sensitive to the feelings of whole groups of people than of individuals. He liked to see every man—himself included—occupying his appointed place in the structure of the district, each with his share of responsibility. He was fond of picturing himself as a runner in a relay race where the baton is passed from hand to hand and the victory, though general, was partly his own, won by his own efforts multiplied by those of his comrades.

He did not know that instinctive fear of looking silly before a large number of people (a failing which is the ruin of many a capable worker). He found it the most

natural thing for an administrator to be speaking with everyone, answering questions, reporting to all. That was why he always kept his office full of people, bringing in new visitors without letting the previous ones leave. He liked it better when a question was decided by the whole gathering, and when, for instance, the financial reports were under discussion he would let all kinds of unqualified but interested parties stick their noses in —teachers, building workers, market gardeners. The discussion would become general and everyone got a pleasant feeling of responsibility for everything that went on in the district.

Yakushonok considered Klyucharev a highly gifted man. He did not think that of himself. "But it could happen," he told himself, "that there were not enough Klyucharevs for every district. Maybe they're still growing up in other places, still going to school, getting their Komsomol cards, but not yet elected to the post of first secretary to the district Party committee. And in some places they may be being superannuated, falling ill, dying. We can't let the common cause suffer for that. It's a great stroke of luck to have a Klyucharev in charge of a district but all the same we can't rely on a single gifted man. To be a good administrator requires real skill. And that skill has to be acquired by all."

Yakushonok considered it highly important to be able not only to obey orders but to issue orders, and not only to issue orders but to learn to listen to other people's point of view. Perhaps because he was a man so avid for work, so independent by nature, he found it difficult to train himself to accept other people's views, different from his own, and it was precisely for that reason that the ability to subordinate himself became for him a cherished aim.

Oh, he fully realized that in time one is apt to grow accustomed to occupying the chairman's post and affect-

ing the tone of authority! But he felt that this must cost a certain impoverishment of spirit. He still felt very young: he wanted to grow—deeper, taller and broader all at once—to grow in all directions, in fact, so that he could draw nourishment from everything that life offers man: work, fame, rest, happiness. . . .

As Yakushonok never imagined himself apart from the people who surrounded him his dreams of self-improvement inevitably merged with thoughts about the reorganization of the district executive committee as a whole. In a formal sense the committee fulfilled both the ideal administrative functions—of order and subordination. The heads of departments, for instance, were subordinate to Yakushonok and in their turn issued instructions to their departments. This was a stable set-up but Yakushonok suddenly wanted to shake it up a bit and find out how strong it was.

At the next meeting of the district executive committee which as was the custom should have taken place under his chairmanship he struck everybody dumb by proposing that the chairman and secretary should be elected. He proposed the candidates himself, made them take his place, whispered something and went humbly aside with a look of sly humility. He wanted to get people into the habit of accepting complete authority of whoever was temporarily in office.

Then, when he left to tour the district, he would turn over his desk not only to his deputy Pinchuk but to each of the department heads in turn, demanding that they should not merely be ready to report to him but take prompt decisions for the whole district.

He was young but he commanded fear and respect, and more than that: when people found new aspects of habitual district government work revealed to them they became anxious not to lose him, for they involuntarily

credited him with the changes that had been brought about in their own character.

Not long before it used to be said that the district could not be imagined without Klyucharev; now Yakushonok's name too was firmly linked with it.

Dmitry Yakushonok gave the impression of being somewhat reserved; true, he was touchy, as everyone noticed, and would suddenly flare up and stare specially hard at something on the side or, on the contrary, looked challengingly at his interlocutor. "Is that so?" that look spelled. "Well, I'll listen to you whatever you may say. You see, I'm listening attentively and no insults can make me think differently of you than you deserve. Don't expect that."

But there was something in Yakushonok as there was in Klyucharev that galvanized others. And when at a crowded meeting he would suddenly say, narrowing his eyes slyly, "I'll tell you a secret..." everybody would start smiling and exchange conspiratorial looks though, of course, there was no secret at all. But they believed that had the occasion arisen their chairman might have trusted them with any secret because he trusted them as they trusted him.

This was the beginning, imperceptible yet but steadily growing, of mutual friendship, apart from official, purely business-like relations.

Yakushonok always drew a very definite line between the "general" talks, with the largest possible number of noisy uninhibited people taking part, and conferences of the district executive committee, though they always took place in the same room and usually the same people were present.

However, while informal office talks were friendly chats, full of wit and humour if circumstances permitted, committee meetings were workings of state power.

And the fact that he relinquished his place to an elected chairman and never interrupted a speaker with a question from the floor, however timely that question might have been, and that when he spoke he always respected the rules of procedure, these things were also a manifestation of his deep respect for the people he had to deal with and for their working-time.

After that first clash with Klyucharev on the telephone (soon after his arrival) it could by no means be said that peaceful good-neighbourly relations were at once established between Yakushonok and the Party secretary. They went on arguing, and not behind closed doors only, but wherever those arguments cropped up—at a kolkhoz, during a Party bureau meeting. But it was argument of a sort that left no one feeling sore; on the contrary, everyone present was drawn into the discussion and soon forgot how it had started. The main thing was to reach the right conclusion.

Klyucharev was more often right. But he soon got into the habit of checking himself with the thought: Would Yakushonok agree? What objections would Yakushonok raise to that?

“That’s the meaning of the collective management,” Klyucharev said one day after a “peppery” talk at the bureau with Lel, the MTS manager. “People advance different points of view and although only one is adopted as decision of our bureau, and not an extreme one at that, it’s useful for all concerned to hear the views of the rest, any of which may well turn out to be the view we’ll adopt next time.”

“Comrade secretary,” Lel interrupted in an injured tone, considering that the remark was pointed at him.

But Klyucharev raised his hand sternly.

“Don’t address the secretary. This is a bureau meeting.”

"Well, Dmitry Ivanovich," said Klyucharev a little later at that meeting, "let us make a tour of the district now: we'll split and go in different directions. Take a look at the harvest for ourselves."

"I expect you'll go to Bratichi," Yakushonok said ingenuously, his raised brow alone betraying a sly hint.

Klyucharev grunted with embarrassment. Yakushonok had put his finger on an old weakness of his.

"You're right. Bratichi it is," he admitted. "A mother loves all her children, one as much as the other. All the same, your heart beats faster when you go to the place where you've tramped the roads with your own feet. You'll feel the same yourself when you've been a little longer here, like me, don't you worry. Why, if I'm not mistaken, you've got your own favourite spots already: Bolshany, Luchesy...."

He did not notice how at the mention of Luchesy, Yakushonok started imperceptibly, pulled himself up and gave him a shy, inquiring glance.

6

Next day Klyucharev's car drove up to the stacks at Bratichi. There was a whole town of them, with streets and lanes. And the wheat was still being brought in.

"The ears are full but the stooks are damp," said Lyubikov modestly as he admired his handiwork. "We daren't let it lie long."

Between two stacks each as high as a two-storey house it was quiet and warm that windy day. The peculiar smell of grain tickled the nostrils pleasantly.

From up above where he had been thatching an artistic cone an old friend of Klyucharev's slid down. It was Sofron Prika.

"I was wondering whose horn I heard blowing," he said, in surprise in which there was more respect for po-

liteness than for truth. He slapped his hand on his linen breeches to shake off the straw and held it out to Klyucharev. "So it was you and our chairman."

Prika spoke in the typical Polesie singsong which gives the firm Byelorussian phrases a softening touch of Ukrainian.

Klyucharev looked at him with satisfaction.

Prika could not be said to have changed strikingly since Klyucharev saw him last at the piggery. He still wore the inevitable bast shoes (which, incidentally, Polesians swear by, saying that leather boots won't take you anywhere across the marshes). His home-spun shirt was colourfully patched on all sides. But his ochre moustache, of lighter hue than his beard, now had a twist to its ends which gave Prika a surprising air of independence and his grizzled fair hair had been cut quite recently, though admittedly in a not very fashionable style.

"So you're not working with the pigs any more?" asked Klyucharev.

"Yes, I am, Comrade secretary. The chairman told me to come over to the stacks for a while, seeing I know that work well. After the harvest celebration I'll be off to the pigs again."

He took them proudly through the town of wheat, showing them his high artistry at stacking the sheaves: he built the stacks tall and slender to avoid rotting, with the damp sheaves on the windward side.

"There's something else I'd like to tell you, chairman. What are they doing, blast their tripes? The team-leader's put an old blind woman on to the gleaning. She sweeps in one place and misses the ears next. I went after her and filled a sack of rye, twelve kilograms it would make. Where would you like me to take that sack, Comrade chairman: to the granary, or shall I feed it to the horses?"

Lyubikov reflected.

"I trust you, of course, Sofron Ivanovich, I know you put all your heart and soul into this work. But I'm afraid I'll have to stand up for you over this business. You didn't do this quite the right way. There'll be people who'll be only too glad to say that you were simply taking the grain home with you. You should have brought it straight to the office."

"It's so far," Prika mumbled, vexed with himself.

"Well then, you should have taken one of your neighbours with you when you gleaned, to stop gossip. Never mind, we'll put it right. Bring the sack to the office. And in future, keep your eyes open for anything wrong."

"I always do. I'm not one to let idlers get away with it."

Later, when they had driven away from the stacks, Lyubikov said:

"I'm sure, Fyodor Adrianovich, that if Prika ever had any other intention about that grain he'll not only forget it now, but also he'll keep his eyes open for anything being done the wrong way. And the main thing is he'll respect himself the more for it."

Klyucharev stole a look at his companion. His slightly raised brows twitched happily. It was the look a teacher casts at his grown-up pupil.

"Now tell me how you are getting on. Are they still 'testing' you?"

"Oh, they're doing that, Fyodor Adrianovich," said Lyubikov, wagging his head. Then his voice became candid: "How could it be otherwise? I'm not the first they've had here. Before I came they were given fine phrases, promises for the sake of promises. With that legacy it's not easy to win authority. Some of them said to me once in a frank moment, 'We admit you're honest and that you can work. But as for trusting you to the end, we can't do that yet!'"

"When did they say that?"

"Last year. We were sitting in the office after a meeting, five of us.... And d'you know what was the main thing they weren't certain of in me? Whether I was really interested in them as well as in doing my job. They thought more or less on these lines: Of course he's got to work, he was sent here for that. But he finds life dull here and doesn't care about Bratichi. It's all the same to him whether it's we or somebody else. The team was celebrating the harvest—like they're doing now. They have brought in the last stuck. They invited me to join them. I went, of course, and joined in the drinking and eating. And I sang and danced with them. Later I heard them saying among themselves, 'We didn't know he was so easy-going and friendly.' The only thing that upset them was that I didn't bring my wife. She had felt shy, and that was bad. Oh, and there was something else in connection with Shura. To begin with she didn't work in the kolkhoz. I never heard a mention of it but people were waiting to see what she was going to do. And they didn't say anything when she went to look after the chickens, a job no one wanted to take on. But there was a new look in their eyes. Another icicle melting. Of course I find things much easier now than in those days. Earlier, when I'd go into a house, out would come the vodka. They'd treat me, press the stuff on me, but watch me all the time to see whether I'd fall for an easy drink. At that festival last year they put a bottle of red wine in front of me (they knew I don't drink white) and Lel and someone else from the district came over. One of them reached for the bottle but a girl snatched it from him and said, 'That's for the chairman.' Made me feel quite uncomfortable. Well, I let them fill my glass and tasted it. Devilishly strong. Another 'test,' I thought: they were thinking that maybe I had something deep down in me which I'd only let out when I was drunk. I pushed the glass aside; they whisked it away and poured me another.

er. They seemed a bit ashamed of themselves for not trusting me, but I can understand them. After all, it's a terrible thing to find out too late you've been wrong about someone you've put all your trust in."

Klyucharev sat in silence. At Lyubikov's last words he nodded thoughtfully. Yes, it was indeed painful to make a mistake over someone whom you had trusted with all your heart. . . . He looked absent-mindedly at Lyubikov and felt suddenly embarrassed by the look of devotion he saw in the eyes of the young man.

"So you don't bear them any grudges?" he said, clearing his throat. "You've got difficult people here, but they're wise. And it's always more interesting to work with wise people."

"Fyodor Adrianovich, there's something I'd like to ask you," Lyubikov faltered. "Give me back my note."

"What note? Oh, the one in which you promised to shoot yourself if I didn't take you from Bratichi. No, my boy, you can't have that back yet. Let me keep it awhile. What if you should suddenly change your mind and ask to be put back in charge of the library?"

The lunch interval was over at the threshing-machines. Women came out of the nearby cottages with pitchforks over their shoulders.

A tractor-driver strode past in oil-stained overalls, his cap at a gay tilt.

A rain-cloud that had covered the sun stretched all over the sky but the threat of rain passed. A fresh humid wind ran from hill to hill, bearing with it all the scents of late summer: the aftermath from the hay-fields, the freshly harvested rye, the sweet aroma of half-ripe apples from the orchards, the raw acrid scent of the nearby pine forest. . . .

During the war the Germans had not reached Bratichi. It was considered partisan land. It's so beautiful here!

The hills, rounded and covered with green velvety grass or yellow rye-stubble, were as pretty as a picture.

At their feet began the lilac twilight woods, the forbidding Polesie thickets which ran on to more distant heights where they stood comb-like against the sky, tearing strands from the low-scudding clouds.

But when all was said and done the best place to be just now was near the threshing-machines.

After worries galore Bratichi was bringing in its last stooks. The work without sleep, without respite, like fighting a fire, had now become a celebration. There was a sparkle in every eye. The women had plaited a garland of wheat ears and, catching the chairman of the village soviet off his guard, slipped it over his head and shoulders and, according to Polesie custom, started tossing him in the air as a mark of honour to the harvest. The chairman forked out fifty rubles without a murmur—it was all he had on him.

“Oh, what a pity we didn’t know you were coming, Comrade secretary. We’d have done better to keep the garland for you. You look as though you’d be good for a hundred.”

“For girls like you, my dears, I’d not stint anything. I’ll come to your harvest festival.”

“You will, really? Oh, won’t we have a lovely dance together!”

“Yes, we shall,” said Klyucharev without a moment’s hesitation though he was no dancing man.

CHAPTER EIGHT ON A MOONLESS NIGHT

1

The district soviet meeting was drawing to an end. Though the dusk deepened in the big room with windows on both sides, the lights had not been turned on. On one side the windows were the ash-grey colour of the dark-

ening sky, on the other they shone brilliantly with the amber-coloured sunset.

Yakushonok had been sitting in silence for some time, his fair eyelashes half-lowered. Those lashes of his, soft as feather-grass, and the white brows above them, gave his whole face a very fresh look, the face of a man who has just washed in cold water early in the morning.

Now and again he pulled a comb out of his breast pocket and forgetful of where he was ran it through his hair; then, pulling himself together, he dropped it back hurriedly into his pocket and frowned in vexation.

He really was very young—that was the feature about him that struck Antonina most of all—and it was his constant care to conceal this disgusting youthfulness. That was why he frowned without any real need, wrinkling up all his brow one moment, or looked at people with so blunt, keen and piercing a look the next. But a golden ringlet would soon slip out of his smooth-combed hair and hang carelessly across his brow. Antonina had the comic idea she would like to put her finger through it. . . .

Sometimes Antonina felt quite scared lest his really boyish nature would break through, and then she would look around uneasily only to find that no one, apparently, saw Yakushonok through her eyes.

What the others saw was the chairman of the district executive committee, an exacting man who in six weeks had gone so deeply into everything that it would have been useless to try and fool him by talk of local conditions.

He had a way of putting questions with a polite little laugh but his smiling eyes were belied by the stern, almost accusatory note in his voice.

People who had come from all over the district, from the most outlying parts, who were used to Klyucharev's

frank excited manner of speech, looked at each other in bewilderment: they could not make up their minds whether they liked this new chairman or not.

The important thing, thought Antonina with sisterly concern, was that at this early stage Yakushonok should not make a slip. Though they were silent, people were listening to him very attentively, watching whether he knew what he was talking about, whether he would not get his figures wrong or run into a muddle.

She stole another covert glance at the others in the room. All around her sat people whom she had known for a long time. Each one of them had some weakness or other that she knew about and she remembered almost every one at least once being put on the carpet at a meeting. But for all that, each of them honestly pulled his load, his work, through faults and shortcomings along the ill-paved roads of today towards the morrow; only those who had themselves worked in a place like Glubin could know the full measure of that work.

Antonina involuntarily darted a glance at Pinchuk: how could he have gone on for years on end calmly directing that comedy known as A Meeting of the District Soviet, preparing boring cribs and listening complacently to the same old gang of people reading them for hours on end, their tortured eyes glued to the paper?

Pinchuk was occupying his official place next to Yakushonok but he was strangely quiet and preoccupied.

It was said that at a bureau meeting of the district Party committee soon after Yakushonok's arrival he had asked with his usual cunning pathos to be sent to work at a kolkhoz (his way, apparently, of "retreating with honour") but that Klyucharev, who loathed all forms of insincerity, had seen through him and raised sudden objections. He was about to say something biting when to everyone's surprise Lel, the MTS manager, broke in.

"We are thinking about the interests of the district," he said tactfully. "The new chairman is a young man, he'll need helping. And who knows the district as well as you, Maxim Petrovich?"

Pinchuk who, a moment before, had felt as taut as a violin string suddenly relaxed. He felt quite touched. Why, those simple considerate words had come from Lel, the man who was so often criticized in the bureau and at conference after conference. For that reason alone they sounded specially convincing.

And wasn't it true that he knew the district better than anyone else? Pinchuk breathed suspiciously loud. He suddenly felt painfully attached to the district. How silly, how useless sounded those words his wife was so fond of saying, "With that service record of yours you'll always find a job somewhere."

From the very start Yakushonok's attitude to his deputy had been equable. He kept any offensive sympathy out of his voice; he had come to work and now Pinchuk was for him as valuable a person as he could hope for to put him in the picture as quickly as possible.

To the surprise of all they worked together smoothly. Sometimes Pinchuk caught himself even admiring Yakushonok.

Yakushonok possessed that circumspection which Pinchuk thought Klyucharev lacked, and that boldness which he, Pinchuk, found lacking in himself.

He saw that in taking the affairs of the district firmly into his hands Yakushonok had acted not to spite Klyucharev or someone else but simply because that was how he understood his duty. And it was with involuntary jealousy that Pinchuk listened to popular reactions to his chief's behaviour: did they understand him or did they consider him an upstart who was trying to establish his personal authority in the district?

Once or twice Pinchuk thought he detected a vexed

expression on Klyucharev's face and that pleased him enormously. "You're wrong about him," he exclaimed in his mind, "but I'm not. I know the real worth of this fellow."

Pinchuk's disinterested relationship to Yakushonok raised his own self-esteem. This mounted every day and helped him to overcome his sense of mortification. Life suddenly seemed to him very clear: there was no sense in looking back. He must do all he could to help the new chairman and work hand in hand with him. All the more so because between them there lay no shadows or reservations as lay between him and Klyucharev. Pinchuk saw that Yakushonok liked his punctuality, that he did not scorn his experience and that though he never addressed him with an ostentatiously polite phrase like "I should like to ask your opinion, Maxim Petrovich," he nevertheless listened to him very attentively, more so even than he listened to others.

At any rate Pinchuk always noticed that when the chairman said his usual "What are your views, comrades?" to the members of the district executive committee he first of all looked Pinchuk's way. However, Yakushonok never put a direct question to him, which might have put him in an embarrassing position—and that too Pinchuk took to be a special mark of respect and confidence in him.

Another thing: not for Pinchuk's sake (Pinchuk might have considered it humiliating) but as a matter of course Yakushonok carefully protected Pinchuk's authority. He was often away about the district and if someone came to his office after his return and said, "You weren't here yesterday, Dmitry Ivanovich, so I decided to wait a day..." Yakushonok would interrupt in an icy tone:

"I wasn't here, but Comrade Pinchuk was."

And he saw to it that the matter raised went Pinchuk's way.

In the past when Pinchuk himself occupied the chairman's post he did not give too much thought to the way he worked. If a matter was complicated he would defer a decision, hoping that it would resolve of itself, or sometimes he would pick up the telephone and shift the responsibility on to Klyucharev's shoulders.

But now it never even came into his head to do anything of the sort. If he was deputizing for Yakushonok he took decision immediately without involving the Party committee—it became a matter of his personal honour as well as the honour of the district executive committee.

Pinchuk was by nature an observant, imitative man. Whenever he took over from Yakushonok he imagined how the latter would have dealt with the question before him and then he would weigh it up, think it over and find the solution.

And when Yakushonok returned he would report to him on office matters—something that the chairman didn't insist on, incidentally—and if Yakushonok dropped a terse "Quite right" or "Of course you did the right thing," Pinchuk would leave feeling as happy and full of beans as a schoolboy. He knew, of course, that Yakushonok would not have forgiven him the slightest mistake nor have ignored him in contemptuous silence as Klyucharev sometimes did—and this made him feel all the prouder.

He was too absorbed in all that complicated new inner world that had been opened to him so unexpectedly at the age of forty-six, making him break established habits, to notice the oblique looks—some surprised, others derisive—that people stole at him in Glubin.

And so he did not notice the passage of those difficult weeks when some were beginning to think that his days in the district were numbered. One fine day he, as it were, woke up to the situation when in an office full of

people he heard himself say in a tone much firmer than the old Pinchuk ever used:

"It'll be done that way and no other, Comrade Chernenko."

And when the offended "Brillantine Dandy" shrugged his well-padded shoulders and muttered, "Then let Dmitry Ivanovich himself..." Pinchuk closed his ears to him—he was not afraid of complaints!—and turned calmly to the next item.

Every day saw the burden of work increasing despite the fact that the executive committee was now functioning at full capacity, as was the Party committee. But the tempo of life demanded enormous effort from everyone providing at the same time a source of encouragement and zest.

It was late when the meeting ended. The deputies stretched their legs and stamped about the room smoking and chatting. Yakushonok's voice rang out easily over the noise asking some of them to stay behind.

Antonina's name was one of those he mentioned.

She sat near the window looking thoughtfully at the darkening sky. It still wore a bright flush but the lilac dusk was rapidly gaining ground, spreading a veil like the cigarette smoke which now floated through the open windows.

Over the heads of the others Yakushonok sought Antonina's eyes. He broke off for a second to ask her whether she planned to stay the night in town or whether a cart was waiting to take her home. No, Antonina told him, no one was waiting for her.

Yakushonok nodded as if to excuse himself for finishing his business with those who had to get away earlier. Antonina went back to the window and leaned her elbows on the sill.

Glubin was quiet and tranquil at this hour. The herd was being driven in amidst clouds of crimson dust. The bells on the cows clanged muffled farewells as they melted in the grass-grown streets.

Antonina felt more at peace with herself than she ever remembered being. Behind her back she heard Yakushonok's loud, confident voice; from time to time she turned slightly to glance at him over her shoulder. The sense of stability and assurance that she felt when she was with him did not leave her.

"How can I tell you you're wrong? You're senior to me," asked the chairman of the soviet of an outlying village. He sounded almost reproachful.

Yakushonok rose to his feet laughing. Under his fair lashes his eyes shone slyly.

"I'll tell you how. Pick up the telephone and say, 'Comrade Yakushonok, help me with this.' I promise, but for some reason I don't do it: I forget about it or don't think it important. A little later you ring me up again and say, 'Comrade Yakushonok, I reported that matter to you, but neither you nor anyone else has come and things are where they were.' I reply, 'All right, I'll take steps.' But, let's say, I forget again. Now the next time you don't speak to me about it, you raise the question here, at a meeting. And then all I can do is to blush and admit your criticism is correct. You've got to realize that you lower echelon workers exist to see that we senior ones do our work properly and fulfil the government's instructions. You are the eyes of the people...."

The top lights were switched off. The room was lit by a single desk lamp. The shadow cast by Yakushonok's head covered half the wall.

Antonina kept her eyes on the shadow. She saw his protruding eyebrows, the deep cavity at the bridge of his nose, the energetically moving lips, the jutting chin

which, she noticed for the first time, was cleft with a dimple.

One by one the deputies left the room. But Antonina went on waiting.

When at last the door was closed behind the last of them and she and Yakushonok found themselves alone he turned towards her impatiently.

"I've kept you waiting too long," he said. "You must be tired. I don't suppose you feel like talking business."

"Frankly, I don't," she said.

Their first words sounded so natural that they both smiled. They might have been continuing the conversation that had been broken off so abruptly at Luchesy.

"All the same, we must have a talk."

Yakushonok sighed lightly and rubbed his forehead as though making an effort of will to bring back his previous, business-like expression. But a guilty smile flashed across his face.

"It's wrong to have these long meetings, I know. But work does pile up so. Never mind, we'll unload, little by little."

His eyes conveyed a friendly invitation to Antonina to help him in his important task, but she suddenly spoke of something quite different.

"D'you know what I was thinking just now when I was sitting there watching you?"

"You were probably thinking God had sent another bureaucrat to the district."

Yakushonok spoke lightly but there was an unmistakable note of uneasy expectancy in his voice.

"N-no, it wasn't that.... When's your birthday?"

Yakushonok's brows shot up in amazement.

"October the ninth," he muttered automatically.

His eyes which were usually screwed up like little triangles opened wide and showed themselves to be blue and of an almost childlike limpidity.

He looked at this young woman whom he was seeing for only the third time in his life, he listened to the unfamiliar timbre of her voice, and if he had been capable of thinking coherently at that moment he would have to admit that she already exercised some power over his heart.

“And mine’s October the nineteenth.”

She spoke with such disarming candour that Yakushonok whose apprehension had been aroused drew in his claws and sat quiet and attentive.

“I’m a year older than you,” he said.

“That’s nothing. Why, we might have shared a school desk! When did you join the Komsomol?”

Only then did Yakushonok get a vague idea what she was driving at. He did not understand yet why she was talking about such things but he no longer questioned her right to talk that way.

“In nineteen thirty-nine.”

“And I joined in nineteen forty.”

However burdened a man may be with years and the cares of life, however old and hardened he may seem to others and even to himself, there is always a key which can magically make the heart turn a hundred and eighty degrees.

Those things that one gives with difficulty, drop by drop, to a friend of one’s later, more mature years—a little confidence, a little warmth—are given generously to those who were witnesses of one’s first steps in life—of one’s youth.

The simple words, “We might have shared a school desk,” performed that sort of miracle and at once sent Dmitry Yakushonok’s thoughts back to the time when a Young Pioneer tie was tied crookedly round his neck for the first time, especially as that occasion was not so very long ago.

And so they sat facing each other with their elbows propped on the table—two grown-up children of the same age, reminiscing together about the youth they had shared. After all, they had grown up in the same world.

“D’you remember,” said Antonina, “*Pionerskaya Pravda* was serializing Alexei Tolstoi’s *Garin Death Ray* those days? It came out every other day and I used to run to the corner of the street every morning to get it quicker from the postman.”

“At our school we stuck the paper up on a board. You should have seen the crowd that gathered during break. Everybody waited for that swine—Rolling, wasn’t it?—to be shot by someone.”

They laughed heartily together over the thrills and crazes they had shared in those days.

“D’you remember when the Turksib Railway was opened?”

“No, I’ve forgotten that.”

“Really? I remember. And the *Chelyuskin* and the first heroic flights.”

It suddenly occurred to Antonina that Klyucharev was nearly ten years older than they. What they had seen as fifteen-year-olds he had seen through other eyes, through the eyes of a grown-up.

“And the Spanish Civil War?” Yakushonok went on. “Train-loads of Spanish children went through our place at that time. We lined up along the railway track and shouted *Rot front!* to them.”

Antonina nodded sadly.

She saw clearly in her mind’s eye those olive-skinned children’s faces under the sharp-peaked “Spanish” caps, pressed to the windows; she saw the little clenched fists go up in a gesture full of a wrath that was by no means childish: *No pasaran!*

Spain! That word still stirred them both today, it was a word they could not hear with indifference.

Meanwhile the pendulum tirelessly counted the minutes, the hours.

"You're not angry with me?" exclaimed Yakushonok, coming to. "I should have let you go long ago. But I so much hated the idea of staying here alone without you."

"I could have come tomorrow."

"Y-yes..." he drawled, showing her out of the room and locking the door behind them. "I know: you'd have dashed back to your Luchesy and there I'd have been, waiting for you."

He looked her straight in the eyes, his head slightly lowered, biting his lip. Everything about him had a stubborn, little-boy look, yet there was also joy and eager expectation there.

A crescent of pure gold was creeping down the sky until it drove its sharp edge into the ground and seemed to pause in meditation. But, evidently, over there at the edge of the world the ground was specially soft: the moon first stuck its only leg into it, then slid in up to the shoulders—and then only the curved top of its golden cap rose above the horizon.

The night grew quite dark and with the darkness it seemed to become warmer and quieter. Yakushonok stumbled.

"Where have we got to?"

Antonina laughed in the darkness. Her laugh was like the murmur of water you will hear on a hot windless day as it runs over the stones.

"How long is it going to take you to learn your way about your own town, Comrade chairman? No, don't be offended, I can see in the dark how you're scowling. And don't try to make excuses. That's a breach of discipline according to Klyucharev. You'd do better to hold on to me firmly and try not to get lost in the dark."

She offered him her arm. Yakushonok grasped it firmly at the elbow and said meaningfully:

"Now I shan't let you go."

Teasingly Antonina gave a sudden jerk and tried in vain to free her arm.

"That's better. Now I can see. Well, let's go."

They turned again and walked to the outskirts of the town; the road led into broad fields.

"Tell me, don't you feel a bit scared when you sit in the middle of the room with so many people watching you?" she asked him all of a sudden.

"Scared? No. Why, did I do anything wrong?"

To set his anxieties at rest Antonina involuntarily moved close to him though as it was they were walking arm in arm.

"Oh no, you were fine. I was just thinking what an effort it always is for me to say anything in public. Even to open a strange door. A good thing people don't notice it. I'm not much of a one for showing my feelings. . . . Isn't that funny?"

He squeezed her arm to encourage her.

"I also have to pretend a bit," he said. "Perhaps that's not quite the right word, but you'll understand. . . . The point is, I don't know much about things here yet. But I must know. Today, for instance, as they were talking I tried to place everyone and everything: Bratichi—yes, that's where it is, and Lyubikov—yes, that's who it is. It's a bit hard to work that way. And the main thing is that it makes me feel awkward with people: after all, there are many here who've had more experience than me and who know quite as much as I do. But all the same I've got to lead them and show them even now that. . . ."

He broke off suddenly in the middle of a phrase, obviously astonished by his own frankness; he looked at her face half turned to him in the darkness, at the hair that lay gathered so calmly on the nape of her neck—even against the black sky it looked dark—and

only sighed meekly and pressed her elbow closer to his side.

“They’re good people, those you’re going to lead,” said Antonina thoughtfully. Her voice sounded gentle. “For some reason I used to think that the value of a person was generally determined by his culture. But now I see that concept’s vague. As Klyucharev says, ‘Culture? Education? Yes. But one has also got to have wits, Antonina Andreyevna.’ He’s right. Take that Skulovets. Did you notice him? He was sitting at the side, a bearded peasant with cunning little eyes as green as marsh grass. When Lyubikov was speaking he was all on edge trying to prompt him. Now, he’s a man who probably knows something you and I don’t know yet, something it’ll take us a long time to learn. But what a joy it’ll be for you and me if we can reveal to him a corner of knowledge that had hitherto been a blank page to him—something we learned at school or college. There’s perhaps nothing so interesting in life as giving and taking knowledge. Am I right?”

“You are. I hadn’t thought of it before but now it seems that way to me too. . . . Where did you spend your childhood?”

“At Velikiye Luki.”

“And I lived at Rechitsa, a little town on the Dnieper. Well, not exactly in Rechitsa itself but at a workers’ settlement in a little pine wood. There’s a tannery there—the Dubitel works. A very big place, in fact. A match factory, too. The Tenth October.”

He pronounced the name with a clipped local accent and Antonina felt a sudden wave of tenderness for him for that little touch.

“What a pity you don’t smoke,” she said shyly. “You’d have struck a match and I could have looked into your eyes and found out what you’re thinking of.”

Yakushonok stopped.

"That's easily mended," he said with resolve. "I've got a box of matches on me."

He took out a box, struck several matches together and held them over his head. His face was pale and tense but his eyes remained glued on Antonina.

And she remembered how once before she had seen just such a look of his fixed upon her.

It is with our eyes that we first betray our feelings. We may not yet be aware of those feelings, that may take a long time, but our eyes know.

The matches burned themselves out. The night seemed darker than ever. There was no moon to light it now.

Antonina felt that she not only divined his thoughts but could feel the very way his blood was pounding in his veins.

"This is what I am thinking of," Yakushonok said slowly. "What would you say if I were to tell you quite simply, without any pretty words, that I love you?"

The heart is bolder than the mind that remembers the lessons of life. It is capable of rejecting the old in an instant and of setting one off gallantly along a new path. It's only afterwards that you can work out how it happened.

Those carefully saved, unspent emotions that Antonina had preserved since her childhood—her desire to be straightforward and loyal, and above all to be happily aware of her own usefulness to others—suddenly and surprisingly merged into a single whole within her heart, directed towards one person.

He stood before her, his hands hanging limp, as though he, like her, was overwhelmed at the sudden happiness that had come to them like a bolt from the blue.

"My darling!" he said, reaching for her hand, and repeated, merely breathing the words, "My darling!"

She could not see his face but nothing in it was concealed from her now. She did not move towards him but

she did not start back either. They were almost of the same height and leaning his head slowly he laid his brow against hers. And so they stood for several seconds feeling with all their beings their inseparability from each other.

“Here is where I’m staying,” said Antonina when they had recovered their breath and torn themselves from their embrace.

Yakushonok took her hand and led her on into the fields. They walked in silence swinging their tight-linked hands. “Are you tired?”

“No.”

They walked on.

“It must be late,” said Antonina after a time. “You have to work tomorrow.”

They stopped. He lit a match and looked at his watch. Again their brows pressed together. He felt her hair damp from the night mist.

“Tired?”

“Yes.”

He slipped off his jacket and spread it on the tall grass at the side of the road.

Without hesitation Antonina slid to the ground. He sat beside her and laid his head in her lap.

She stroked his brow, slipped a finger through his curly golden ringlet....

So this was happiness? This was her love?

She looked at him with something like amazement. Yet at that moment she felt she had known him for ages —all her life. His face looked up to the sky across which floated the whitish clouds of approaching dawn.

“It’s time to go home,” said Antonina after a long silence.

But they did not get up.

Every love has its tranquil hours of perfect understanding. This was their hour of tranquillity. The past

had ceased to exist. Before them lay only the future. The night had gone, yet still they sat beside the road.

Antonina was the first to get up. Yakushonok, his face pressed to her body, looked up at her with shining eyes. There was something unusually touching and overpowering in the humble way that big strong man sat at her feet.

"May God punish me if I give him up or make him unhappy," Antonina told herself as solemnly as though she were taking an oath.

And feeling a sudden responsibility for them both she raised him from her feet with a gesture of her hand and led him back to sleeping Glubin which lay veiled in the morning breath of the river.

2

The day that had dawned so happily turned out to be an unhappy one for both of them.

Yakushonok got no sleep that night. By eight he was already in his office regretting only that it was not possible to come earlier.

He was still excited. He wanted to keep continually on the move, talking and laughing. Something sang in his heart and he kept looking around, happily shy, to see whether others could hear that music too.

Antonina's name was always coming to his lips. He could not get rid of it, could not resist the temptation of saying it aloud.

In fact, he mentioned Dr. Antonina Lukashevich three times to the first person who came into his office that morning irrespective of relevance.

That person happened to be Chernenko. The mention of Antonina's name made him start inwardly and prick up his ears for he had very lively memories of his own unsuccessful attempt to court the doctor.

The previous winter, while travelling in the district, he had dropped in at Luchesy. The village stood on the side of a hill—to protect the cottages from the floods—and in that dark night the steady, unflickering lights of the hospital windows were visible from afar.

“It glimmers before the traveller’s eyes and lures him to a night of ease,” Chernenko declaimed as, powdered with snow, he entered the hospital. Antonina met him on the threshold.

“Hush,” she said, “the patients are asleep. What is it?”

Chernenko found himself thinking that he had never seen the doctor with any make-up on, never heard her laugh loudly. He had no idea, in fact, what type of person appealed to her. All that he knew of her was the official data of her age and the fact that neither she nor her family had any black marks against them. (He did not, of course, scorn such information for he was not going to ruin his own career by a thoughtless marriage.)

“Don’t be annoyed with me, Antonina Andreyevna,” he said involuntarily lowering his voice. “I got caught by the bad weather. Run out of petrol. Surely you’re not going to turn me away?”

In case of this unforeseen breakdown he had provided himself with a bottle of wine, a bar of chocolate and a bag of oranges. Besides, he wanted to hear from Antonina what colours suited her best. Some fairly decent dress lengths had been delivered to the warehouse.

Antonina looked at him for a few moments in silent meditation. Then she left him, to return shortly afterwards with a coat and shawl on.

“Let’s go,” she said shortly, opening the front door and showing him the path with a pocket torch.

“What? Where to?”

“To the chairman of the village soviet. We can’t leave you to spend the night out of doors, can we?”

And now, in Yakushonok's office, Chernenko sat looking just as smart as usual, his hair well brilliantined, his side whiskers neatly trimmed. He watched Yakushonok stealthily. Black envy and deep mortification gnawed at his petty heart.

"Y-e-s," he drawled at last in a curious succulent voice. "Antonina Andreyevna is without question a charming woman and not too strict either.... They say that Fyodor Adrianovich hasn't avoided her nets either...."

For a flash Chernenko was himself frightened by his own words, and paled. But the blow had been dealt and had been so strong that he understood at once that Yakushonok was not interested in revenge nor in explanations—he was far beyond that.

Mumbling apologies Chernenko backed to the door and slipped out of the room. Yakushonok was on the point of shouting, "You swine!". after him but the words stuck in his throat, his lips would not move and his arms and legs felt limp.

A moment later he had pulled himself together.

"I must be crazy," he said aloud to himself with mirthless laughter. Why had he not shut the fellow up at once? She and Klyucharev? Why, it could not be possible. What a good thing Antonina would never hear about it!

The telephone rang. He picked up the receiver.

The day took its course, an ordinary working day. But as Yakushonok dealt with routine business he felt something heavy gnawing away at his heart, spoiling all the joy he had felt that morning. What if it were true? Yet only a few hours before he had been kissing her. Well, was it so unusual for a man to kiss a woman? It proved nothing, it even— He grasped his temples with a feeling that he was stumbling into the mire from the straight road he was on.

Surely Antonina could not have left for Luchesy? Just when he so much needed to have a talk with her or at least to look at her, to see whether she would face his eyes....

There was a knock on the door.

"Come in."

It was the old man from the planning department, the one who had tested the grain with his teeth at the elevator.

"Well, Dmitry Ivanovich, take a look at him," he said on the threshold. "Sabotage. Sheer insubordination. Giddy pranks."

Lyubikov, to whom these ominous words applied, came behind him, lagging a little so as not to push the old man with his massive rounded shoulders.

"Insubordination, yes. But not pranks," he said.

"Well, what is it?" asked Yakushonok wearily.

"Are we living according to plan or not?" the old man snapped. "Perhaps we have capitalistic anarchy in our district? A special local form of Soviet power: socialism minus planned economy. If I'd overlooked so important a change, Dmitry Ivanovich, you should have told me."

Yakushonok, who felt a smile coming involuntarily to his lips, looked at Lyubikov and realized that the old man was far from joking: he was really boiling with rage, the reason being the stony obstinacy with which Lyubikov now stood before Yakushonok. It was evident that there had been a long and fruitless wrangle in the district planning department.

"What's it about?" asked Yakushonok.

The old man spluttered and hissed like a jet of steam from the spout of a kettle.

"We began with a talk about the harvest. We talked of this and that and then out he came with it—they don't want to sow barley. Apparently barley isn't a suitable

crop for Bratichi. Good for everywhere else in the district but bad for Bratichi."

"It's bad for the whole district too," sighed Lyubikov.

He looked stubbornly out of the window, all but indifferent to the scene in the room.

"I suppose you think the people at the State Planning Commission are idiots who are being paid for doing nothing."

"All the same I don't understand what this row is about," said Yakushonok patiently. He addressed himself to Lyubikov; he wanted to hear what he had to say.

Lyubikov shrugged slightly. He seemed reluctant to have to start telling the story all over again.

"We can't get ten centners of barley per hectare on our land, that's what's the matter. Two years running we asked to be allowed to sow what suited us. No, they said. They're always planning a little of everything. I'm surprised they haven't inflicted on me a plan for growing tangerines or laurel leaves yet."

"Did you raise the matter with the regional executive committee?"

"There? Why, they get their plans all cut-and-dried."

"I see. Well, what's to be done?"

"Nothing. I won't sow barley. If you want to remove me from my post, then do so. But I won't sow it. That's all I have to say."

Though Lyubikov's calm manner was not entirely affected it nevertheless contained an unpleasant, strained quality. Yakushonok realized at once that what was at issue was not those twenty hectares of barley, which, after all, would scarcely be noticed in the general economy of a big place like Bratichi, but some inner decision that Lyubikov himself had taken. It can happen that a man who has been enduring uncomplainingly for a long time, closing his eyes to things and keeping his mouth reluctantly shut, suddenly decides to dig in his heels and

retreat no further. And the more he has tolerated and kept silent, the more adamant he becomes later on.

Yakushonok felt somewhat at a loss. He realized that he did not as yet possess sufficient authority in Lyubikov's eyes to be able to placate him or make him change his mind; nor had he the power to alter the planning system against which Lyubikov had revolted perhaps with good reason.

He felt suddenly vexed with himself for having so scanty a knowledge of economics. He would like to have put aside everything else and plunge into books, read masses of statistical reports in order to get at the truth. Such calculations as this, mistaken to the point of absurdity, should not creep into the general plan even though they affected the smallest, the most microscopic sector—a mere twenty hectares.

"Well, let's go to Klyucharev," he said unexpectedly to both men and rose.

For a moment he felt another stab of jealousy as they walked along the red strip of carpet ("merchant-style" Antonina had called it the day before) where Chernenko had trodden two hours before.... That's enough, he told himself angrily, let me catch you thinking of it again.

Klyucharev no longer occupied the small office full of fireproof safes where he had spoken a month before with Valyushitsky. He had moved back into a large room with a long table for bureau meetings, portraits on the light-coloured walls and white window-curtains that hung to the floor. The room smelled of fresh paint. The first person Yakushonok saw there was Antonina.

She had drawn her chair right up to the corner of Klyucharev's desk ("She won't get married for seven years," Yakushonok found himself thinking foolishly as he recalled the popular superstition about sitting at corners) and she and Klyucharev were reading a letter together and talking quietly.

Yakushonok's appearance seemed to embarrass Antonina slightly and before smiling at him with her eyes alone she stole a guilty look at Klyucharev.

Klyucharev was not particularly pleased to see his unexpected visitors; he looked up with a question in his eyes.

Yakushonok let Lyubikov and the old planning pundit go ahead of him, thus gaining a moment for silent thought. The cheerful spirits in which he had entered the room were dampened at once. Maybe the whole district had known about their relations for ages? Maybe it was only because he was a gullible newcomer that he had believed every word she had said, almost wept from happiness as he had buried his face in her lap.... Or perhaps she had simply come to that office on business, as he had done. After all, Klyucharev was the secretary of the Party committee. What was there unusual about her visit? He looked at Antonina in astonishment.

She was pale after a sleepless night but her level dark brows lay as calm as ever and her lips were tightly compressed. He found it all but impossible to believe that he had been kissing those lips so recently.

She gave him her hand and responded to his squeeze by letting her fingers linger in his palm a second—a mere second. His heart leaped violently. He wanted to embrace her and thus announce his relationship with her to all. He took a pace back to avoid temptation.

Antonina returned to her place and sat with her chin propped on her folded hands.

Yes, thought Yakushonok, her eyelashes were very dark, not soft and curly but straight as arrows, and below them her eyes were smouldering fire....

The old planner started pouring out his complaints the moment he entered the office but now Lyubikov was no longer silent. The easy, natural way he pushed aside a squeaky chair, sat facing Klyucharev and laid his

strong hands on the desk, the unmistakable trustfulness in each gesture and intonation, which, so markedly absent from his manner in Yakushonok's office, now suddenly came to him—all this jarred unpleasantly on Yakushonok.

He found himself in that muddled state when one's mind seems to be divided. He knew well how and what for Klyucharev had gained the respect he enjoyed and, moreover, fully shared that feeling himself. Yet now, all of a sudden, he felt overwhelmed by a turbid wave of nonsensical, mortified hostility, by an urge to humiliate the man, at least in Antonina's eyes.

"I don't want to have to act like a bailiff at the collective farm," Lyubikov was booming indignantly in the meantime. "I don't want to work that way: getting an order and reacting to it—getting a directive and obeying it. If that's the way you want people to work you'd better invent a machine for it."

"Now, now," said Klyucharev placatingly.

But he did not interrupt Lyubikov's flow of words: he was either letting the man talk himself out or considering some idea of his own.

"But, you silly fellow, you've got to realize that the general plan is too big to take into account every furrow, every molehill in your marshes. You'll never find enough minds to consider all that."

The old planning official emphasized his words by tapping his pate which was sparsely covered with hair as fine as chicken down.

"And I'm not going to sow spring wheat either," snapped Lyubikov in the tone street urchins use to say, "Boo to you!" "Nor spring barley. What's the good of it, Fyodor Adrianovich? You know yourself that the only way of growing anything in our district is to sow in autumn. Otherwise we're just robbing ourselves of grain."

The old man wailed, calling down all the thunder of the State Planning Commission upon the head of the insubordinate kolkhoz chairman. Even Yakushonok was diverted from his thoughts; he waited tensely for the argument to develop.

"How much autumn sowing are you supposed to do according to the plan?" Klyucharev asked reflectively.

Lyubikov named a figure.

"And how much spring?"

The planning official replied this time.

Klyucharev picked up a pencil.

"I see. And your yield? But, mind you, don't give me the figures of the record sections, Alexei. On the contrary, tell me the highest figures for spring and the lowest for autumn sown. Right. Eloquent, eh? What do you say to that?"

"I've nothing to say," said the old man, "those figures may say one thing here in Glubin and something else a hundred versts away. If we're going to have to fit the plan to suit every district—why, that would mean thousands of plans for the Union!"

"You mean it's all right to lose thousands of tons of food in one place and another, do you? And what makes it worse, you consider that normal."

"Moscow was not built in a day," the old man muttered. He had suddenly become sad and subdued. "You are young people. But I've been in service, if you look in my record, since 1917. We couldn't go into details those days. We had to build the state if only in the rough."

Behind those words there also lay a truth, the truth of a human life that was already nearly spent but which had done the right and useful thing for its country. All four—Antonina, Klyucharev, Yakushonok and Lyubikov—felt that and looked at the old man with different, more attentive eyes.

"That is true," said Klyucharev after a pause. "Every period has its own task. But now, in nineteen fifty-four, we can and must look to the details and plan the economic life of Bratichi and Bolshany according to their particular needs. What is your opinion, comrades?"

"Yes, indeed," said Yakushonok, forgetting his jealousy.

"You're right, of course," said the old man with a sigh. "But it's not us who decides those things, Fyodor Adrianovich."

"Agreed, but if you don't object, we'll do this: you and Lyubikov will prepare all the necessary data concerning the district—taking each crop, and adding your own observations. Don't rush the job, you can take a month or two over it. As you know, we are considered a good district in this region and Ozersk is a poor one, yet we have the same conditions and share the same troubles. So we ought all to get together and discuss things. And then we'll write a collective letter to the Central Committee. Do you think we've got enough brains to do that?"

The old planning official rose to his feet solemnly as if to underline the fact that jokes were out of place in juxtaposition with such solemn words. He bowed to Klyucharev in an old-fashioned manner.

"I can assure you that Alexei Tikhonovich and I will prove ourselves worthy of your confidence. Can I leave now, Comrade secretary?"

He left with Lyubikov. Yakushonok stayed behind. He was watching Antonina hard. She looked thoughtful as her fingers played carelessly with the sheets of the letter she had been reading with Klyucharev before they were interrupted. The envelope lay nearby on the desk. Yakushonok was too far away to see who the letter was from or what it was about.

"As a matter of fact I have what is essentially the same problem, Fyodor Adrianovich," Antonina said

suddenly. "I wanted to discuss it with Comrade Yakushonok yesterday but there was no time."

The fact that she had mentioned the previous day—casually, in a purely matter-of-fact way—and had pronounced his name with hardly a glance in his direction (but how could it be otherwise, here in another's office? With half his mind he accepted that as reasonable) put Yakushonok on his guard again.

Klyucharev turned at once.

"Yes, Antonina Andreyevna, I'm listening."

"I don't know how to use our funds. The hospital is allocated money for purchasing linen, blankets and so on, but we have all we need in this line for the time being. Yet if we don't spend that money, next year that item won't appear in our plan. That's what they tell me. Meanwhile we need beds, bedside tables and stools. Our manager makes them himself because there's no item in our estimates that covers them. What could be simpler, you might think? To spend the money we've been given on what we really need. But they tell me I'd be practically committing a crime against the state. I could buy myself a carpet for the office—that would be keeping to the estimate. But I haven't got an office."

Why was she saying all this to Klyucharev, Yakushonok wondered. Hadn't she intended to speak to him, Yakushonok, about it?

"What do you think, Dmitry Ivanovich? What should we advise Antonina Andreyevna to do?"

"Nothing," said Yakushonok in a strained voice. "An estimate is an estimate."

Klyucharev rose to his feet and paced up and down his office. He ran a hand through his hair.

"There's nothing I can do about the estimate either. We can't write yet another letter to the Central Committee. But I don't know of any greater evil than paragraphs and rules which you can't break away from

even for the good of the work. The result is not only that we sometimes do absurd things but that we have to justify them in our own eyes—and in other people's."

Antonina watched Klyucharev gravely. Everything in her thoughtful pose—her head bent down a little—and especially in the intensity of her gaze, spoke of the agreement in which she usually found herself with this man's ideas. It was a feeling Yakushonok knew well himself.

But now Yakushonok was resolved to misinterpret Antonina's gaze.

"What's really bad," Klyucharev went on, "is when a living person gets put into a paragraph in a set of rules. I often find myself thinking that what hampers our work more than anything else is forms. But for them we would really look at people; as it is we look at the form and that's the end of it. What a fight I had about Pavel Gorban with the regional authorities and later in the Central Committee of the Komsomol! You'd think those people had caught night-blindness: they don't see more than three steps ahead. They just droned on that he'd had so many years at organizational work, that he'd gained experience.... What sort of experience, I ask? A man sits at his desk for twenty years and everybody shouts about his experience. In fact, all the man has been doing is filling a chair."

Antonina nodded tacit agreement.

"No, there, I'm sorry to say, I can't agree with you, Fyodor Adrianovich," Yakushonok interrupted irritably. He could restrain himself no longer. "Why should we make allowances for everybody's whims? One person doesn't like working here, another there; that won't give us cadres but so many Flying Dutchmen. Some'll go after work that interests them, others will be after an easy life, others out for money...."

"But that's not what I'm talking about," said Klyucharev with surprise.

"Oh, yes, it is," Yakushonok almost shouted. "What about a man's duty to the state? He wants to give nothing and take everything, that Pavel Gorban of yours, and we're supposed to be tactful with him, to create the right conditions for him to work in. What right has he not to be able to work where he's been sent? Especially if it's on something the country really needs just now."

"But the country needs other things too," objected Klyucharev with a frown. "Driving a tractor may be even more important than sitting in the district Komsomol office."

Yakushonok tossed his head sarcastically.

"Oh yes, he happens to have hit the nail on the head this time. Machine workers are needed and his heart yearns for machinery," Yakushonok rapped out the words. "But, pardon my frankness, it's a bit like banking on what happens to be in fashion. How do we know that he's not simply running away from the responsibility of the mess he'll be leaving behind him?"

"How can you speak that way of someone you don't know?" exclaimed Antonina with something like indignation.

Yakushonok turned sharply to her.

"Because I judge things by practical standards and not by . . . by lyrical sighs. Life requires not only enthusiasm but first of all work."

"You're right off the point, right off it," said Klyucharev with a pained frown. He looked involuntarily at Antonina for support and maybe to set off his rightness and his superiority over Yakushonok in the argument. He may even have had a subconscious feeling of rivalry.

Antonina's calm nod in response to this look was more than Yakushonok could stand.

If she had kept quiet his jealous thoughts might have

been extinguished like those other, equally crazy, hasty conjectures which had haunted him that morning. But Antonina spoke in a patient, persuasive manner which he now found particularly offensive.

"Fyodor Adrianovich is not thinking of those who are trying to deceive us. But surely one of the most important and noble tasks of the Party is to help people find their place in life, to show a man what his true calling is."

"No," said Yakushonok. "The first thing the Party teaches is discipline. We haven't the time to waste on idlers and failures, examining them under microscopes. I never trust those who ask too much for themselves. You can rely on them about as much as you can rely on a woman...."

"You've got everything mixed up," said Klyucharev swiftly, glancing at Antonina who had paled noticeably at Yakushonok's last words. "Where's your logic? I'm sure you don't really think that."

"Oh yes, I do," said Yakushonok distinctly with that cold defiant desperation when it seems that the worse things get, the better, provided it is all soon over.

He saw Antonina looking at him, first with fixed attention, then with incredulity and bitterness. Finally, she turned away from him a face full of hostility. "Go away. There's no point in your saying anything more,"—that was what he read in her eyes.

She even touched impatiently the sheets of the letter on the desk as if she were anxious to change the subject.

Then he calmed down and took fright. A vision of dawn-touched clouds flashed through his heart and for a few moments he stood confused, his head hanging low.

"The district committee car is going Luchesy way," he said hoarsely. "Would you like a lift, Antonina Andreievna?"

"No, thanks. I still have some things to do in town."

He turned and went out of the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

"Well, just look at the way he's suddenly gone off the tracks," said Klyucharev. "He's young. On the boil all the time."

"Perhaps it's not only because he's young," said Antonina in laboured tones.

Through her mind flashed the unbearable thought that she might have made a mistake. The second mistake in her life. Insight had come to the eighteen-year-old girl after a year, but at twenty-eight a woman must be able to see better.

The last few days she had lived in a daze; to tell the truth, she could think of nothing but Yakushonok. But who was he, this Yakushonok? Did she really know him any better than she had known Orekhov? How strange and unkind were those words that he had just spoken, looking at her as though he were insisting that she agree with him at once! But she was not his slave, she was a woman with her own will and reason.

"He's not got a proper place to live in yet," she heard Klyucharev saying. "He's staying in the hotel. We'll soon have a flat ready for him and then he can send for his family. At least he'll get his meals punctually."

Klyucharev smiled good-naturedly. His eyes shone with a deep blue light when they fell on Antonina.

He was enjoying the simple and rare pleasure of having her next to him. Besides, they now shared a common secret, a small one maybe but none the less their own: Dr. Lyarovsky's letter about medicinal honey.

Klyucharev was the only other person who knew the truth about those wretched beehives. Antonina had not found time to tell even Yakushonok about them. So it was quite natural that on receiving a reply from Lyarovsky her first impulse had been to show it to Klyucharev.

The better she grew to know and like Klyucharev as a human being the more guilty she felt on his account. She had not been able to bring him the least happiness in life. In fact, she may only have made his life more complicated and difficult than it had been before they met.

And after that happy dawn with Yakushonok's words of love ringing in her ears she felt specially conscience-stricken before Klyucharev. Instinctively she wanted to compensate him somehow for his loss, if only with a kind word or two, a little attentiveness in the way she listened to him, in the ardour with which she took his side in argument. She had found it hard to look at Yakushonok when he came into the room; she felt as shy as a schoolgirl. In the light of day their love seemed to her something strange, absurd almost. And yet how delighted she had felt at their unexpected meeting!

But her joy was short-lived.

Yakushonok's angry, irritated, caustic tone had upset her more than what he had said. Her hands dropped lifelessly. Klyucharev's casual words about the flat and about the family she was hearing about for the first time were the last drops in the cup of anguish she had had to drain that morning.

For a moment she wanted to draw close to Klyucharev and bury her face trustfully in his firm shoulder as she had done ten years before with that elderly major: she wanted to smell the harsh, masculine, protective scent of tobacco.

"Leaving? So soon? Wait a little, there may be a car...."

"No, thank you, Fyodor Adrianovich, they're sending a trap for me. Thank you...."

On the town green with its platform for the annual holidays Antonina stopped and looked aimlessly down

at the grass. Perhaps because of her sleepless night her nervous excitement had changed to apathy. She did not want to think of anything, she wanted to wipe everything out of her memory.

She walked on, eyes downcast, not even noticing that in front of the district executive committee offices across the square stood that jaunty little camouflaged jeep, ready to set off somewhere, or that Yakushonok was just opening the door to get in. She did not observe the way he stopped, as though thunder-struck, when he caught sight of her.

Yakushonok's first impulse was to call to her, and right there, in the open, to explain in a hasty contrite whisper his own stupid suspiciousness and tell her how much he longed to hear her say that nothing had changed in their relations, and perhaps to arrange straight away for their next meeting. But she passed by quite close as though he were simply not there, wrapped up in thoughts which he could not divine and raising her eyes only once to cast a long lingering look at the Party committee building as if she had left half her heart there.

Angry and resentful, he sprang into the car and slammed the door with all his strength.

3

One and the same day—a day when the clouds gather and the sun shines the same for all—sometimes leaves different impressions in different people's memories. “It was such a lovely day,” one will recollect though his neighbour may remember it as a day of lashing rain, the day he caught a cold. But that only means that everyone carries his own sun in his heart. It accompanies you everywhere and wherever you turn your eyes every-

thing is bathed in its generous light. Even later, years afterwards, you have only to recall that day for young, pure emotions to revive in your heart.

For Zhenya the day began with the hoot of Klyucharev's car in the hotel yard. It was such an exact replica—but now such a happy one!—of the last occasion that she dashed down the steep stairs only just restraining herself from sliding down the banisters.

"What about going to Bolshany?" Klyucharev asked, leaning out of the car.

He was wearing a tall cap and his usual tunic. Even that coral-pink line on his brow from the hard rim of his cap looked the same as before.

With a glance at the sky Zhenya snatched a jacket off the peg and bound her head with a strawberry-coloured kerchief.

"Listen," Klyucharev said as they drove away, "I have to drop in at the MTS for a time. You can go for a walk in the woods while you're waiting. The sort of talk I'm going to have with Lel is for men's ears only. Wouldn't do for a young girl like you to hear us."

Beyond the MTS, where an engine throbbed tirelessly, a fir wood began. There was no wind and the black-trunked firs stood as still as though time and space did not exist in this wood. The low, slanting beams of the sun which only just managed to penetrate to the depths of the wood set aglow the reddish pine-needles at the foot of the trees. And that glow was so strange and bright that Zhenya wanted to stoop and warm her hands by it. The moist beads of blueberries glittered thickly at her feet. A smell of mushrooms rose from the ferns that grew densely in this damp thicket. Fir cones—brown of the previous year and young green ones fallen before their time, as crisp as young cucumbers—lay with their tips buried in moss. There were fallen berries in the

moss too, hard to get out. One would need sugar-tongs to get at them, thought Zhenya.

Her hands and her legs almost up to her kness were wet from the blueberries but the paths led her deeper and deeper into the woods, farther and farther from the living throb of that motor.

Every place has its own conception of "remoteness."

How remote, for instance, had the Polesie regional centre seemed to Zhenya in Moscow! And when she got there they had scared her with their "Oh-oh, Glubin!" But you had only to travel some twenty kilometres from Glubin to find—Dvortsy. There, you might think, was real, unspoiled "remoteness." But no. Beyond Dvortsy lies Grabun which Zhenya had not yet visited, and beyond Grabun, they said, was a place called the Velemicheskiye Farmsteads. And so, step by step, one new place appeared after another, like precious stones taken out of a casket.

Yet even to those places the shrub-cutters, tractors and bulldozers went along the log-roads and forest tracks. Supple as snakes, the humming telegraph wires ran from pole to pole. Village cinema-men jolted along cart-tracks bringing the world of today in their round tin containers.

"Never mind! Our planet hasn't been too badly fitted out for pleasure too," Klyucharev told Zhenya once with a laugh. "Although the Lord God hasn't supplied us with two hundred million model souls to build communism with, we're not complaining. We'll manage with what we've got, ordinary plain folk who are wonderful in some respects and not so wonderful in others. You can't get everything at once. Neither you nor I are great catch either, Yevgenia Vasilyevna, but all the same we don't live off other people's bread."

He laughed and patted the sleeve of her jacket lightly. Zhenya dropped her eyes guiltily. That vague sense of

guilt that she had felt in the train on her way to Polesie after her talk with her fellow-travellers had not yet disappeared; in fact it had grown stronger from day to day. She had felt uncomfortable driving from farm to farm in the Party committee car; sometimes because of her presence Klyucharev could not give a lift to travellers more important than her: land improvement experts, school-teachers, team-leaders. Yet no one had ever mentioned it and Snejhko, the district committee instructor, even said enviously once:

“It must be wonderful to have to travel a hundred kilometres in search of a song.”

But Zhenya herself did not feel any all-consuming passion to travel to the edge of the world in search of songs. She wanted to do something else too. In her notebook she began to jot down not only transcriptions of local vernaculars but notes like: “Tell Fyodor Adrianovich that Chairman Grom never gives money either for books or even for red calico to put up slogans. Before each holiday the Komsomol members rub out the old ones and write fresh ones so that you can hardly make them out,” or: “Anton Semenchuk is a member of the kolkhoz board but he’s taken his son away from school saying that seven years there is enough. Misha Semenchuk’s a born mathematician: if he is not meant for a technical college, who is?” or: “Professor Chernoshchek came to Bolshany and turned everything upside down again: instead of putting the best cows on bigger rations he’s put those whom he thinks of the right colour. Seems to me that the only point of that Bolshany breed is to turn black cows into red ones. The collective farmers laugh up their sleeves and the manager of the cattle farm is furious: he doesn’t care about the colour, what he wants is good milkers.”

Whenever she met Klyucharev, Zhenya at once poured out all her observations. Sometimes he laughed at

her and taught her a little elementary agriculture and on those occasions she did not take offence, just laughed at herself. Often, however, he listened attentively. And once he even turned the car back.

“You just tell all that to the board,” he said to her in a tone that brooked no denial and that familiar, cold, angry look came into his narrowed eyes.

But it was not with Zhenya that he was angry; she had a right to be driving with him, they were equals, united by a common task. That is why she was able to tame the fear that stirred in her heart and to go to the board with a happy sense of responsibility and stand up and say everything she had to. She had expected to be met with hostility, derision—after all, it wasn’t her business. But everyone around sat quietly and the chairman, coughing a little, began to defend himself, his eyes shifting apprehensively from Klyucharev to Zhenya, from Zhenya to the meeting.

“As Comrade . . . er—”

“Vdovina,” Klyucharev prompted sternly.

“As Comrade Vdovina has rightly said. . . .”

Klyucharev usually addressed Zhenya by her first name and patronymic and behind this polite form of address she felt the lurking of that old distrust.

Back in the car after that memorable board meeting, Klyucharev turned to Zhenya and said suddenly, looking at her in a humorous, quizzical way:

“So that was all right, Comrade Zhenya.”

“Yes, it was,” she replied readily, putting her palms to her hot cheeks. “It was, Comrade secretary.”

... It was only when she felt the air growing cooler and noticed that the sky was darkening and felt the earth damp underfoot that Zhenya realized she would have to hurry back before she was out of earshot of that motor and before she was caught in the rain.

Ugh, how silent and deserted the woodland path

seemed now! The dampness made her shiver and although there was life in the thicket she heard only an occasional flutter of wings. A belated bee buzzing desperately circled blindly in the air and became entangled in Zhenya's hair. She saw a beetle carrying off its load of a straw. But what is the world without human beings? It has not even got the eyes to look at itself. Zhenya ran over the slippery fir-needles back along the path to the gates of the MTS.

There were many demobilized soldiers working at the MTS. Nearly everyone went about in semi-military dress: faded tunics, forage caps, army boots. Maybe it was this that underlined even more heavily the precise, almost military rhythm of life there, something which pleased Lel a lot, though he himself wore an embroidered home-spun shirt over his stout body.

"So that's settled," Klyucharev said to him on parting. He now seemed in better spirits. "You won't forget anything?"

"Fyodor Adrianovich!" Lel replied indignantly. "When I was in the army I once brought back a prisoner straight to Headquarters, to the general, according to regulations. The general was busy, I was ordered to wait. We waited one hour, two hours. Finally I asked the adjutant, 'Ask if he hasn't forgotten.' The general ordered the adjutant to tell me, 'If I forgot things I wouldn't be a general now.'"

"You mean an MTS manager has no right to forget either?"

"That's right."

"You know," said Zhenya brightly after they had driven away, "I'm very fond of Lel. He's so jolly and irrepressible. What is it he says? 'When the music plays why not dance? We'll keep our tears for when they're needed' and 'Who the devil made you step on a rotten bridge?' He's the best man you've got, isn't he?"

"What about Lyubikov?" said Klyucharev huffily. "You ought to take a better look at him. He's a wonderful fellow."

"Oh yes, Lyubikov. Lyubikov too."

"And what about Snejhko? For two years I myself was silly enough to think there was nothing to him but his grey eyes and his bushy brows. There are people like that, Zhenya: they look quite average sorts; when you talk to them you scarcely look at them but meanwhile every word falls into their minds like a seed and they all sprout in their time. Or take another man we had—Leonty Ivanovich Lobko. It's a pity you missed him. When you go up to the regional town you mustn't fail to call on him, I'll give you a few lines to him. He lectures at the college there now. He's a real eagle. An eagle!" Klyucharev finished on a note of complete confidence as he recalled the puny, bald-headed Lobko.

They drove on for some time in silence, lost in their thoughts. Suddenly at a place where the road forked—it was where Klyucharev had once picked up Dmitro Myshniak with the bandaged arm—Zhenya saw a woman spring from a farm cart and run down the road, stumbling and waving a kerchief that she had snatched off her head.

"Fyodor Adrianovich," Zhenya cried out, laying her hand on Klyucharev's sleeve.

Klyucharev stared and jerked the wheel. The car swerved.

"Turn round, Sasha."

The driver swung the car round. The road was bad, all the windows of the car rattled and it ran on as though it were gasping like the woman who was hurrying towards them. Zhenya could see her plainly now: she was tall and under her flapping overcoat a doctor's smock showed. When they came up to her, her face looked paler than the smock. And to Zhenya's amazement

she saw that the sight of the woman had made the blood drain from Klyucharev's face too.

"What is it?" he called brokenly.

The woman's hand rose to her throat in the instinctive gesture of someone who has been deeply hurt or feels desperately ill. It lasted but a moment, it was as though the sight of Klyucharev had caused something to snap within her that came out before she could stop it, as blood would spurt sometimes before you can staunch it.

"Good-day, Fyodor Adrianovich," the woman faltered, then suddenly recollecting herself, added timidly, "Oh, but I've seen you today."

Zhenya had never seen eyes like that before: dark grey shot with green and brown as if the daylight, passing through the lashes, had splintered in the pupils.

"Fyodor Adrianovich, are you driving to Bolshany?" the woman asked. She had recovered now and was making an effort to speak in an ordinary, business-like manner. "May I use your car if you're going to stay there some time? I've been called to Pyatigostichi—they sent a cart for me, there it is—but it looks as if it's a very serious case and every minute's precious. I may have to bring the patient to Glubin or even send him by plane to the regional town."

"Naturally, of course," Klyucharev assented hurriedly. "We shall stay at Bolshany and Sasha will drive you over to Pyatigostichi and then wherever you need to go. Get in, Antonina Andreyevna."

He opened the door for her and she got in, meeting his look of alarm with a laboured, colourless smile.

"It's a bad road to Pyatigostichi," she whispered, averting her eyes. "What if we got stuck?"

Klyucharev waved her down impatiently. The car set off.

"Heavens, how unhappy she is!" thought Zhenya with

a flash of intuition. "What could have made her so unhappy?"

For the rest of the way they travelled in silence.

Antonina sat quite still; even her breathing was inaudible. Klyucharev did not turn to her but his shoulders betrayed how tense were his feelings.

At Bolshany, Klyucharev and Zhenya got out. Antonina fell back on to the seat of the car. Klyucharev hesitated for a moment as if expecting her to say something to him.

"Well, off you go," he said at length and slammed the door. The car moved off and through the rear window they caught a fleeting glimpse of Antonina's bowed shoulders and the dark plait of hair at the nape of her neck. They could not see her face.

"Something has happened to her," Zhenya said with conviction. "Some grief. You will see."

Klyucharev turned on her sharply.

"What did you say?"

He touched his eyelids with finger-tips as though the light hurt his eyes.

"I don't know," he said slowly. "That I don't know."

He stood in the road for a moment looking after the departing car. But only for a moment.

A general meeting had been convened at Bolshany on the question of a new obligatory minimum of work-days.

Klyucharev glanced at his watch and pulled a wry face.

"Look here," he said, "while you're gathering I'll wander a bit." He made a vague gesture. "I'll go to the stock-farm," he went on firmly and waved Snejhko back to his place. "No, don't you come, I'll go alone."

It was drizzling. The branches of the trees outside the window absorbed the warm rain like sponges. Zhenya

stood near the beaded window-pane following Klyucharev with her eyes; when she turned back to the room she suddenly noticed Blishchuk stroll in. He looked tamed, almost respectable.

A general discussion was in progress about a distant grazing meadow. Blishchuk joined in: no, he didn't approve of that meadow.

"But you didn't go there this year," others interrupted him, "you don't know."

Blishchuk grew excited.

"What d'you mean I don't know?"

He looked sullen and grey, like the rain outside.

Snezhko sat with his back to him, behind the red-clothed chairman's table. He looked young and very calm. But one could feel that even his back was sensitive to the other's every movement.

"Fyodor Adrianovich is coming back," said Zhenya loudly from her place at the window.

Blishchuk got up and with bowed shoulders made his way through a side door.

They had gathered in the club but the table for the board members had been set not on the stage but in front of it, almost up against the cherry-coloured curtain.

Over the curtain hung a bright, hand-drawn picture: a coat of arms framed in standards looking rather like straight red tubes, smoking factories and an old-fashioned combine amidst plump ears of wheat.

"Hey, you ought to improve your machinery," said Dmitro Myshniak loudly as he came in with Serafima.

Although he worked in the Luchesy tractor team, Myshniak had not lost interest in the affairs of his native Bolshany. Moreover, Serafima was alone that day: Vasily Moroz had gone over to Glubin. What Dmitro had suffered no one knew but himself and, maybe, Aunt Paraska. But in company he was merry and calm, he had bought back his accordion and had even put his name

down for Vasily's music circle. However suspiciously he examined Vasily he could find nothing wrong with him. The game was being played according to the rules. Anyway, Vasily was a decent, straightforward chap.

For all his jealous sighs and fuming vexation Dmitro had to give Vasily his due. He too wanted to be a decent, straightforward chap.

Dmitro's appearance in the hall was greeted by a hum of approval.

"The God of agriculture himself has come," someone said.

Klyucharev who was walking between the rows at that moment turned sharply.

"Ah, Comrade mechanizer," he said and Zhenya was relieved to hear that his old humorous manner had returned.

"As a matter of fact, if I were Lel I wouldn't trust you with a piece of machinery. Just look at your own bicycle. That is yours by the porch, isn't it?"

"But I ride through such mud, Comrade secretary. I've no time, I'm on the go day and night."

"I'm not talking about the dirt. But look at the way the handle-bars are twisted and everything bent. If you can't look after your own property, how can you be trusted with state property?"

Dmitro scratched the back of his neck. Everyone laughed at his embarrassment.

Only later did Zhenya realize that Klyucharev had provoked the laughter for the sake of breaking the tensed state of mind in which people had gathered at the club that evening.

The question of the work-day minimum is a delicate one in village life. Over it the most various interests clash. Especially in those collective farms where the work-day is not respected very highly. Once the minimum has been fulfilled you are out of reach of any laws

or regulations. A low minimum gives an opportunity for careless folk, interested in their own gain, and for those who are simply profiteers and idlers to make themselves comfortable on kolkhoz land and enjoy all the privileges of being collective farmers.

“Who is afraid of us fixing a high minimum?” asked Snezhko on opening the meeting. “Those who work honestly won’t be frightened even if we fix a minimum of two hundred work-days a year. None of us wants to wave the big stick but we all know that we’ve got to work. Come on, comrades, let’s have your views.”

There was immediate hubbub, a shower of complaints. Looking the team-leaders straight in the eyes the people of Bolshany started listing when, by whom and how there had been miscalculations and who had been shielding their wives. For instance, the orchard team-leader had carted apples for two days and put down the work in his wife’s book.

“Of course, if you have somebody else’s back to hide behind even a hundred days’ work is too much, but if I have a whole family to support I can’t get along by only doing the minimum.”

“We ought to fight not for one hundred and seventy but for three hundred work-days,” said Goryachka, a man of substantial mind, “but our norms are such that we work and work and get nothing for it. We get two work-days for carting thirty loads of hay and the same for thirty stacks of rye—and you know what a back-breaking job binding sheaves is.”

Serafima and the girls shouted from the floor: “We don’t even know how many work-days we’re being credited with. We come to the office and they don’t show us the ledgers.”

“You see, Fyodor Adrianovich,” whispered Snezhko, leaning towards Klyucharev’s ear, “you see what a legacy I’ve got. Bad discipline, bad rules. No one re-

members Blishchuk any more, I'm made responsible for everything."

"That's right. Scared, are you? Why haven't you revised the norms and kept an eye on the accountants? Come on, conduct the meeting, don't let it get out of hand."

"Serafima," said Snejhko, getting up, "have a little patience—you'll take the floor at the proper time. You know the rules yourself: besides the accountant there's the kolkhoz board, there's a chairman, there are plenty you can complain to. Go on, Comrade Goryachka."

"I'll tell you my own case," the old man said unhurriedly. "I stack the hay and for that I get three-quarters of a work-day which is the same the watchman gets by sitting still. In other words, there's no point in working."

"Naturally," put in Anton Semenchuk derisively. He could contain himself no longer. "If I could earn money by lying on the stove I'd not do a stroke of work."

"Silence!" said Snejhko. "We'll get this all straightened out. I shall explain things to the women. Whom should we apply the rule about non-fulfilment of the minimum to? If a woman has small children and there's no crèche, we can't hold anything against her. Nor can we apply the minimum to invalids. It's meant for those who refuse to work honestly."

"Two hundred work-days isn't enough to ask of them," growled a man who had just been using some very strong language about some piece of injustice.

"The leading kolkhozes owe their success and their wealth to their discipline," said Snejhko. "No one absents himself from the hay-making or the harvesting without asking the team-leader. But here it's different, you can walk through Bolshany sometimes and see women sitting by the cottage gates and young people tending the pigs. Or else everyone goes off picking cranberries."

ries, so that you might as well close down the whole kolkhoz."

"Oh, it's not as bad as that," several voices, half-embarrassed, half-offended, spoke at once. "You've just noticed one or two women...." And they stole glances at Klyucharev: they were jealous of the honour of their Bolshany.

"All our future depends on our working honestly now," said Snejhko. "The government is meeting the collective farms halfway in everything. A million and a half rubles—that's what this district alone is paying out every year to women with large families and on pensions. And another eight million on schools. Now I've got something else to tell you. Some of you complain that the kolkhoz has paid an advance on the year's work considering only the first six months and that the seventh month isn't included; and so the school children haven't been paid for the work they did during the holidays. Well, Comrade Klyucharev is here from the district Party committee to tell you that we're soon going to try and go over to a general system of monthly payments. You'll get your advances twelve times a year."

There was still much noise in the hall but now its character had changed, it had become calmer and friendlier; it had a business-like note.

Outside the window long drops of rain fell from the edge of the roof. The sky, lit by a smoky sunset, glared into the windows. The raindrops fell slowly and they too were caught in the light and glowed like drops of dull yellow glass. It was drizzling intermittently as if the early autumn were in a hurry to sow the freshly ploughed fields, generously scattering the raindrops in the belief that each one of them, penetrating the earth, would take root there and grow to cover it with a thin carpet of shoots.

When the meeting was over and Klyucharev, his face tired and flushed, came out on to the porch, the sky had cleared.

A pale and tranquil moon hung low over the horizon, a mere finger-nail of a moon. Before it had time to dip itself in silver it was already doomed to sink below the horizon. A second moonless night was falling.

"So you're back," said Klyucharev to the driver as he walked up to his car.

"I took her there, Fyodor Adrianovich. Everything's all right."

"Did you take the patient too?"

"Yes, we did. It was Filonkin from Pyatigostichi. I expect you remember him. Antonina Andreyevna took him to her hospital over at Luchesy. He's got tetanus. All in convulsions. A tall, wiry fellow he is. . . . Aye, the doctors have a terrible job, I must say."

"Well," said Klyucharev sharply and swung round. "We'll drive to Dvortsy. Any objections, Zhenya?"

It grew dark quickly. They passed a first, a second, a third village, dark and shaggy among the trees. At nearly every garden gate stood a couple of lovers or simply two girls in white.

The road ran through forest, through meadows dark like fathomless lakes. There was a sharp, intoxicating smell of willows, a sweetish raw scent.

"On a hot day the smell is fit to make you turn quite dizzy," said Sasha over his shoulder. "We'll be at the river soon."

The road narrowed and began to wind. The car plunged fearlessly up to the axles into puddles which hissed under the wheels like the legendary serpent that guards its secret confines. They reached the ferry and stopped.

"Hey, ferryman!" the driver shouted and suddenly whistled piercingly; it was that kind of night, a moonless highwayman's night. There was nothing to be seen in it.

They could not see the river but they could sense its presence by that peculiar stillness that broods only over water on a still night. In the murky darkness of the earth and sky there was after all something unsteady: the movement of invisible clouds floating overhead, life in the grasses which rustled as tiny creatures and grasshoppers moved through them. But the water lay still and mysterious.

Sasha switched on the headlights and two scaly golden beams lay across the river. A fish leaped, its dreams disturbed. The ferry rope strained, breaking out of the water.

The ferry moved silently but they could hear clearly the sounds of strain from the ferryman at the winch. The river gave off a wintry chill. Ugh, she was an evil, terrible beauty!

The Dvortsy club was not yet fully built and the young people of the village gathered near the kolkhoz office, a plain wooden house. On the porch a girl was waltzing in a partnerless dance. There was no music. The only radio set in the whole of Dvortsy emitted crackling noises under Valyushitsky's hands. Klyucharev sat beside him and twiddled the knobs.

"The batteries are run down, aren't they?"

Then he looked at the young people who had trailed after him into the office and stood there in silence.

"Well, it's a dull life you have here, isn't it?"

He recollected how one day he had chanced to arrive at Dvortsy on an evening when an amateur concert was being given.

In a room with unpainted, ink-stained floor-boards at the elementary school the desks had been pushed back and covered with planks, a multicoloured patchwork cloth hung on a cord—and there was your stage.

The room was crammed. From five-year-olds who fell off to sleep at once, to old folk eager to watch so unusual a spectacle. When the girls danced the accordionist leaped in his chair as in a storm, so springy was that plank stage.

“Never mind,” said Klyucharev, coming back to the present. “You’ll soon have your club. We’ll bring electricity here by the New Year. You’ll live here as well as we do in Glubin.”

Valyushitsky jumped up suddenly. His hot Gypsy eyes flickered with derision and reproach.

“I wouldn’t let everybody into that club yet, Fyodor Adrianovich.”

“Why not?”

Valyushitsky turned and in a loud voice called:

“Volodya Kolyastruk! Here, speak to him for yourself.”

Volodya had been sitting in the room for some time looking out of the gloom from under his fine broad brows. His handsome oval face would have graced a pack of playing-cards: his mouth was red, with a dark line of moustache above it, his hair jet-black. Zhenya glanced at him and found her eyes resting on him for several seconds.

A place near Klyucharev was made for him. He took it if not very willingly, at least without raising any objections and with a look of complete indifference.

Volodya had been sent to take a course in agriculture but on his return had shown no eagerness to work. He was lazy. Why should he work? He had no children to support.

“But we have a girl, Valya, who took the same course and who’s now in charge of a group in the flax fields.”

Klyucharev, blinded by the light of the kerosene lamp which stood right in front of his face, screwed up his eyes in vain search for Valya in the darkness.

"Come and sit nearer, Valya," he said.

The girl came up shyly and sat on the bench next to Volodya. She had a childish, modest little face and pale eyes with thick golden lashes.

"Well, Volodya, look at her," said Klyucharev with a glance of involuntary admiration at both of them. "In what way is she better than you? You grew up together, you studied together but you work differently. You heard the way she was praised. How nice that must be for her!"

He stopped and looked at the lad with a friendly, fatherly light in his eyes.

"You're not a hopeless case, of course. After the harvest come and see me at Glubin, come straight to my office. We'll have a talk. Come on, my boy, let's show Valya and the chairman and everyone else that you're not what they think you are."

Volodya remained silent.

Suddenly Klyucharev turned to Valyushitsky and said slyly, "I think he just enjoys being made such a fuss of."

Valyushitsky jerked his shoulders.

"Excuse me, Fyodor Adrianovich, but you don't know him. He's got absolutely no pride. He's a fellow with no ambition in life. He's grown quite out of hand."

The object of all this talk did not stir. Not a smile, not a shadow of emotion crossed his face. All the same, Zhenya was convinced that he was listening attentively. There was something suspicious about that studied immobility.

"Oh no," said Klyucharev, "it's easy enough to write a man off but we must try to make a real man out of him. How old is he? Seventeen? He'll soon have to do

his military service. What sort of soldier will he make with that silly character of his? No, he has to be helped."

Klyucharev changed the conversation: he enquired how many work-days various people had got for the harvest. Even Valyushitsky had to admit that there had been a case when one team-leader had lowered the earnings.

Now that he had been forgotten, Volodya sat watching Klyucharev hard; his brow was furrowed in a frown, his mouth half open; he seemed to be on the point of saying something.

"A fine team-leader he is!" he said at last in a firm but broken bass voice. "He never goes to the fields."

Everyone turned and looked at him in silent surprise.

"Oh no, I'm sure he goes to the fields all right," said Klyucharev quietly.

"Then he doesn't measure how much work a person does. He just makes a guess at it," said Volodya stubbornly, glumly.

"Now that may be. It means the team needs a good clerk."

Klyucharev addressed everybody, including Volodya, but his words were meant in the first place for Valyushitsky. He spoke simply, without any undue stress, respectful of everyone's point of view.

"All right, we'll talk shop later on," he said, suddenly breaking off. "When did you have your last film show here?"

"Two months back," Valya faltered with a rush of courage. "But you couldn't call it a proper show. You couldn't see or hear much. The projector was out of order or something. And the mechanics spent all day sitting in cottages and swilling home-brew."

"Where are your eyes, Valyushitsky?"

"We don't have any music," the girls chorused. "There's an accordionist working in the sawing-shea

but you can never get him to play.... And on Sunday we plan a party."

Klyucharev turned to Zhenya and said in a gay, young, challenging voice:

"Shall we come on Sunday? What d'you say?"

"Yes," Zhenya said, returning his smile. "Absolutely. And we'll bring our accordionist."

It was very late when they left Dvortsy. Now and again Zhenya's head slid on to Klyucharev's shoulder.

"Fyodor Adrianovich," she said at last, bravely struggling against her sleepiness, "would you like me to recite a poem?"

"Go on."

Zhenya sighed and recited in the singsong tones that poets usually affect when they read their poems:

*How strangely like you did the artist portray
That woman—but now she is far, far away!
That taciturn mouth and those features bespeak
A spirit like yours, now unbending, now meek.
You both are like clouds which a river reflects,
With changes and whims that one never expects.*

Klyucharev listened without interruption.

"Who wrote that?"

"I did," whispered Zhenya, blushing deeply.

Klyucharev grew suddenly more interested.

"Yes, it's very much like her, very much."

"Like who?"

"What d'you mean, like who?" said Klyucharev. "Why, like Antonina Andreyevna, of course."

They both fell silent.

"But who is the other woman?" Klyucharev asked after a time.

"My friend Marusya Pryseva. We were at school together. She was lovely too," said Zhenya. Her voice was full of sleep.

"Ah, Zhenya my dear," Klyucharev said in a very quiet and tender voice, "you're too young to understand a thing."

The car swayed on. Zhenya's head jerked as they struck a pot-hole and Klyucharev put his hand up quickly to protect it. She breathed warmly and trustfully into his palm, like a puppy cuddling up against its master. A whole world of dreams curled over her prominent sunburned brow. Klyucharev sat motionless.

His son Gena, now fifteen, had been born to him when Klyucharev was younger than this girl that sat beside him. But she had her whole life before her. She had yet to know the keen, happy play of the emotions, the right to choose, the right to change her mind. Those were things he could never have again. There is nothing more bitter, more irreparable than those mistakes which our hearts involve us in when we are young. Impatient for love we thoughtlessly mistake the first spark, the first sign of sympathy for the real thing and squander our life so recklessly, thinking perhaps that we shall escape retribution. And later we persuade ourselves that we can live a whole lifetime with someone for whom we have but little love—hoping that that person will not notice it, that we can fill our life with work, with affection for our children, in the knowledge of our own bitter rectitude, and with so many other things too....

But there comes a day when the possibility of real love knocks at one's heart. And then we stand defenceless, bound by a sense of duty, not knowing how to respond to that late love, not daring even to look it in the eyes. "If only we had met earlier!"

The car jogged on. Zhenya's warm cheek pressed against the sleeve of Klyucharev's tunic.

Sasha suddenly looked over his shoulder. The car jerked to a halt.

"That's that," said Sasha angrily.

Klyucharev started.

“What’s the matter?”

“Tank’s empty. I warned you, Fyodor Adrianovich. I took enough for Bolshany but you sent me to Pyatigostichi and then Dvortsy....”

“Wait a moment. How much farther can you drive?”

“A hundred metres.”

“And with a bit of enthusiasm?”

Sasha made a gesture of hurt pride.

“No more than half a kilometre. That’s all.”

“Well, drive on. Maybe we’ll reach a cottage. We can’t sleep in the fields, can we? Wake up, Zhenya, this is where our adventures begin.”

They climbed up a shaky ladder into the hay-loft. The master of the house, who was under the strictest of instructions not to disturb his wife, gathered up in his arms two sheepskin coats with shaggy linings, a stiff sort of horse-cloth and a pillow in a cotton pillow-slip.

“Maybe you’d like some milk?” he entreated in a plaintive voice. “I’ll fetch you a jug.”

“We don’t want anything,” said Klyucharev sternly. “I told you: we’ve run out of petrol, that’s why we’re stuck. You can give us something to eat in the morning. Excuse us for troubling you and go off back to bed.”

“It’s no trouble. We don’t get visitors like you every night,” the man muttered obstinately, shifting on his bare feet. “Maybe some honey? I cut it from the hives only yesterday....”

Without answering him Klyucharev climbed easily up to the loft. From up there in the dark he held out a hand to Zhenya. Stepping over a beam she was at once buried in thick hay that had not yet had time to settle. A heady scent of fading flowers enveloped her and her first impulse was to hasten back to the fresh night air.

But the fancy only flashed through her mind and was soon forgotten.

Her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness and she lay down submissively on the horse-cloth and pressed her cheek to the pillow.

"Now, no talking," said Klyucharev firmly.

But silence did not fall at once. Klyucharev and Sasha whispered a few words to each other before they stopped tossing and turning. Then Zhenya herself turned over and this started a whole orchestra of dry rustling sounds playing right up against her ear. She lay as still as she could, listening for the sounds of Klyucharev's breathing. But evidently he lay too far away from her for she heard nothing.

Zhenya was just about to fall off to sleep when her attention was caught by a resonant and very distant sound like the chirring of a cicada in the grass. She lay with closed eyes, listening....

Her heart overflowed with quiet and tranquil joy. This chance lodging (she had caught a glimpse only of a thatched roof and linen hanging on the fence) made her feel so peaceful, so light at heart that had it not been night and had not the two weary men been lying there asleep, she would have burst into a quiet song. Not even a song perhaps but simply what people probably used to sing at the dawn of humanity: without rhythm or melody—simply an outpouring of all that lay in her heart and of what her eyes saw.

During the drive that day they had crossed a river with low grassy banks, like all small rivers in Polesie; but the water in this one had not been black and peaty but brilliantly clear, iridescent, sun-filled....

"That's the Pramen. It means 'light,'" Klyucharev had told her. "It's fed by springs in its bed, that's why it's so clear."

"Pramen, dear Pramen," Zhenya sang silently, per-

haps I shall never see you again. But no, I shall see you once more if we come back along the same road. But how to find that road back to you only Sasha knows. Only Sasha knows because he's at the wheel...."

The resonant chirr which Zhenya had forgotten all about suddenly rang very loud, quite near her face. She opened her eyes and in the dim starlight that penetrated through the chinks in the roof she noticed a motionless hand with open palm. On the wrist, its face glowing with a faint green light, a watch ticked tirelessly.

The hand was so close that Zhenya could even feel its warmth.

Scarcely breathing, she raised her head and moved a little nearer.

Over an hour had passed since they arrived at the cottage. Dawn could not be far off.

The cold air made Zhenya shiver.

She reached out her hand and touched the open palm with her finger-tips.

Klyucharev's hand was quite cold. He must have been lying that way from the moment he fell asleep. Zhenya thought for a moment, leaned forward and breathed on the hand to warm it, then without further hesitation drew Klyucharev's sheepskin well up to his throat. Klyucharev sighed deeply but did not wake up.

Zhenya waited another moment, then moved back to her place. She no longer felt the keen early-morning chill. But as she fell into a deep sleep her heart still glowed with joy.

There are occasions when time suddenly seems to stop. The days pass as usual, one care comes after another: you talk and argue, laugh even, drink your morn-

ing tea and go to bed at night—and yet you feel you are living in a vacuum.

Filonkin's temperature had risen again. Antonina read the thermometer, her face calm and composed under the gaze of the man's feverish eyes. Only her patients knew that expression. For grizzle-cheeked Filonkin Antonina was now dearer than a mother, the most important person on earth.

She was the doctor. She was all-powerful. A word from her sufficed to bring an aeroplane to Glubin with the serum. And in his gratitude to her he bore the pain. He trusted her so completely that he felt no fear of death, though death stood very close, had already touched his body, twisting his muscles convulsively, laying an ashen pallor on his face. And now his eyes were not on the glass tube with the mercury inside, which Antonina was holding thoughtfully in her hand, they were on her face. And they were full of devotion, of warmth, of silent questions.

Antonina laid her hand fleetingly on his forehead and her hands, laced tightly at the cuffs of her white smock, were not only merciful but full of power.

Filonkin wanted to show her as best he could that he trusted those hands, that he was exerting every effort. He even tried to smile. "It's all right, doctor, it's all right," that smile was meant to say, but his eyelids trembled, his brow burst into perspiration and all his being went out to her, as a child's goes out to its mother, calling, "Help me!"

She smiled at him with her eyes, straightened his blanket sternly and walked away with even, unhurried step. But he knew that she was promising him life. And he felt calmer.

Life, life. How could she give back to Filonkin his life?

She had brought him to the hospital a week before, his face blue and distorted—the poison of the tetanus bacilli had penetrated his bony frame.

Filonkin was a simple man of little education, a Pole-sian from Pyatigostichi village, whose idea of medicine was exhausted by the phrase, "I got a pain in my innards." He was a man of great courage whom Antonina had learned to respect. He may not have realized the full extent of the danger but he accepted the pain fully and bore his sufferings in silence.

Antonina knew one thing only: she had to save his life. She had to do this because she valued this man and believed that he was needed in the world. Because he had children and a wife, a wife who had not dared to sob but had simply stood silent on the porch watching the doctor. And finally because he believed in her, Antonina, so implicitly, and consequently in the Soviet power that had sent her to this place.

She had to save him but meanwhile the poisonous bacilli were boring deeper and deeper into his poor body.

One night Antonina even woke Klyucharev with a phone call: she needed serum at once but the people at the regional town had told her to wait a day or two until it could be obtained from elsewhere.

Klyucharev, sleepy, dishevelled, half-dressed, rang up Minsk immediately and got on to the ministry.

"This is Klyucharev, a deputy of the Supreme Soviet. . . ."

The reliable little medical plane arrived before dawn and Filonkin got his injections.

Antonina kept going in and out of the ward with that same calm pace, taking her patient's temperature and not allowing herself either relief or disappointment, and it was perhaps because of this that Filonkin, his confidence in her powers growing all the time, became more confident in himself too, so that at last there came a day

when he thought of his home, drank some soup and even listened to the radio by means of the old ebonite headphones (Antonina had managed to get a single pair for the whole hospital and was very proud of it). And Antonina went back to her quarters feeling terribly tired, worn out and happy. The whole day passed in the light of that great victory. The manager discussed it gravely, the nurse went about as though she were celebrating her own birthday.

It was not until evening that Antonina, opening the window and stretching her hand to the cool rare drops of rain, felt another wave of sad longing. She had not seen Yakushonok for a fortnight. But she had heard by chance that he had left for Minsk on some business a day or two before. And now as she aimlessly watched the smoky moonlight her thoughts followed him on his journey: the car drive to the nearest railway station, then the train. Puffing and scattering wisps of steam it ran across the darkened land and overhead shone that same brass moon, that same smoky sky.

How empty that cosy sleeping compartment must seem to him! His travelling companions are reading with concentration—three silent figures. The light burns warm and even, all the ceiling lamps and the table lamp too. Station after station.... Station after station....

Oh, if only everything would finish soon, pass like a fever! Hadn't she told herself ten years ago: this shall never happen again? And she had been so proud of her strong will-power....

"God, is there ever going to be an end to it?" she said aloud.

But there was no end. Another day awaited her, then a night. And always that feeling of living in a vacuum, of irreparable loss which came to her in those rare, bitter moments when she was quite alone.

CHAPTER NINE

THE BEGINNING OF AUTUMN

1

Now every morning began in dense mist. Not a breath of air, not a rustle. The sun glared whitely as if it filtered through frosted glass and only at about nine o'clock did the horizon clear and the air, resonant as a drum, bring every sound from afar.

Bolshany lay amidst rustling golden trees.

Snezhko, in an overcoat with bits of straw clinging to it here and there, sat in his office rocking reflectively in a hard chair with rounded arms, waiting for the board meeting to start. He was worried: Klyucharev had just telephoned—he needed a sample of flax to take to a conference in Minsk where he was going in two days' time. But there was no flax left at the collective farm, except for the stock that was being jealously kept at the office for the U.S.S.R. Agricultural Exhibition. Would he have to go from cottage to cottage looking for some?

"Aha, it's not so easy to be famous, eh?" Klyucharev had teased him over the phone. "Next year you ought to reserve half the crop for exhibition, like Blishchuk used to do. That's the only way."

"You may laugh, Fyodor Adrianovich," grumbled Snezhko good-humouredly, "but now I divide my life into two parts: the time before I became a kolkhoz chairman and now."

"Well, how are you getting on, now?"

"All right. I got a good night's sleep and feel a bit brighter."

Snezhko stretched till his joints cracked.

A young woman from a neighbouring village poked her head round the door and came in. Though barefoot she

wore a pretty skirt with a lace pinafore over it in the Polesie way. After every phrase she tossed her head coquettishly, setting her flat, silver earrings jingling.

"Come to Bolshany for cucumbers, have you? Haven't you any of your own?" said Snejhko importantly.

"Seems not, Comrade chairman. Or maybe yours are sweeter."

"Thirty-five kopeks the kilo."

The woman shifted from foot to foot.

"Couldn't you make it a bit cheaper? I've come a long way...."

Snejhko's face broke into a sudden smile:

"Now really! I'm not a merchant. The board fixes the price."

These days the board met often, twice a week, and put in order questions four months old. In addition to the board members many people came out of sheer curiosity. The overflow stood on the porch and whenever there was a burst of laughter in the room people out there would stand on their toes and ask, "Who was that? What did he say?"

Snejhko rarely said anything and even then only after listening to everything that was said, even to the remarks from the porch. Familiar touches of Klyucharev often crept into his manner and gestures, even into his way of speaking. He seemed to be always glancing back at Klyucharev: it made him feel surer of himself.

This meeting went fairly smoothly until the question of a calf that had died was brought up. The report drawn up by the vet said that it had died of festering gangrene of the lungs caused by neglect.

Someone outside the door grumbled obstinately:

"That calf was sick before then."

"If it was sick why didn't you inform me?" Chizh the vet, a dark, Gypsy-looking, wiry man with wild eyes, raised his fist to thump the table. But he was sitting too

far away from it, so instead he waved his fist in the air. "In my opinion the manager of the cattle farm ought to pay the cost of that calf."

"Oh no," a hoarse voice cried from the porch. "What's all this? Can't a calf die on this farm? Show me a place where there's no death, I'd go there myself. Write it off and let's hear no more of the matter."

Chizh flashed his metal teeth.

"If you do I'll take it to the procurator."

The board members exchanged hesitant glances and shook their heads. The question was put to the vote: to write the value of the calf off or recover it from the manager. Four voted for, four against.

Snezhko read the vet's report through again with a grim look on his face. Then he stood up.

"I propose we send for chief vet Perchik and let him decide what were the reasons for the calf's death. And my next proposal is that during the next fortnight all members of the board should take turns of duty at the cattle farm."

"Give us lamps, otherwise we can't see to milk in the evenings," said the manager, calming down a bit.

"Very well," said Snezhko hoarsely but very firmly. "Kolkhoz Chairman Snezhko is to obtain lamps within the next three days."

There was a hum of general approval.

The fine-browed, white-bloused bookkeeper, Klava Borkinka, read item after item. She smiled faintly as she read.

"Oh, just read out the essential parts. Trofim Sotnik didn't turn up at work. Is Sotnik here?"

A young man with a cap on the side of his head made his way to the table. He had a ruddy, clean-shaven face and deep blue eyes.

"I was making a flax-shredder for my wife," he said candidly. "She had to go out on the flax."

"How did she manage last year?"

The young man heaved a faint shy sigh.

"I only took her to wife last winter."

Everyone laughed and Snejhko said with a smile :

"Well, if you took her to wife without a flax-shredder in her dowry you ought to be reprimanded. Who votes for that?" To Sotnik he said reproachfully, "You saved your own family a hundred rubles but we may have lost a thousand because of it."

A young woman named Agafya Zayats had left work to go and gather mushrooms.

"I've a baby that I've weaned and I went off to be out of his sight...."

Tears of shame and emotion sprang to her eyes; she wiped them away with the end of her kerchief.

Snejhko scratched his head and said quietly:

"Yes, I know, that's a weaning custom you have here. But why didn't you tell your team-leader you were leaving?"

Next to appear before the board was a merry-eyed little man who shrugged good-naturedly and said:

"Well, I was out in my boat and there were some ducks nearby. My dog jumped into the river and killed a duckling. It was the first time he'd ever touched them. He's such a quiet little dog."

"Refund the value of the duckling," the board told him and waved him back to his place.

Klava read another item: a wolf had made off with a goose.

The meeting was in a very cheerful mood by now and people started proposing that the wolf be summoned before the board and fined in work-days.

Anton Semenchuk who was wearing his familiar wadded jacket nudged his neighbour in the ribs and heaved a deep sigh.

"D'you hear that? Fine the wolf! Oh, what a lot they are!"

Snezhko tapped the table with his pencil and frowned.

"Comrades, Kuzma Blishchuk wants to move to the Crimea with all his family."

All heads turned to where Blishchuk stood.

"Have you been recruited for work there?" the ex-chairman was asked.

"No. I'm going of my own accord. I'm tired. I want to live somewhere where it's warm. I got my fill of frosts at the front, you know."

Blishchuk stood with his eyes downcast, twisting his cap in his hands.

A silent disapproval rose between him and his fellow-villagers.

"And you won't come back?" someone asked.

"I can't say for certain," Blishchuk replied in a low voice.

"You'll come back here to die. One's own earth is softer."

After a vote had been taken Blishchuk bowed to each side of the room and walked slowly out with a mournful look on his face.

"Thank you," he said at the door.

"God go with you," the people said to him.

Snezhko too watched the disconsolate man leave the room.

"Now we must have a talk about the widows," he hurried on in a loud voice. "Let's see how the board can help them. Then there's the question of the children who tend the herds. It won't do to go to school only once a week."

2

Yakushonok returned to Glubin early in the morning. He left for Luchesy the same evening.

"Please look into things there, Dmitry Ivanovich,"

Klyucharev had asked him. "What's the trouble between Grom and the agronomist? They spit at each other like a couple of cats. And they got Myshniak quite distracted once. He didn't know where to send his combine: the kolkhoz chairman ordered him to cut the rye and the agronomist sent him to the timothy-grass. Grom himself went with him to the fields, but the agronomist came along and sent him elsewhere."

The last few days had been very warm. It was almost as if summer had returned. Such days are called "Winter in Summer Clothes." Those evenings the full moon rose early and its light too was warm and pinkish. The air and the earth feeling soft under bare feet—everything was tender and gentle. Oh, how keenly does a young heart yearn for happiness on such a night!

The hazy mirage around the rim of the moon diffused its light on to the clouds as light as goose down. But there was no wind to hound the cirri together and they stood motionless and left the stars unscreened.

Luchesy lay in quiet, not even a dog barked. The hospital windows were walled off by a thick hedge of lilac. Everything around was purple and gold, only the leaves of the lilac retaining their deep green. They would still be summery green when they fell. . . .

"This is the situation, Dmitry Ivanovich," said Grom, setting out with the honourable intention of being objective and restrained. "You know how things stand with us regarding the fodder. We have no meadows—not a damned bit—just tree-stumps and marshy hillocks, and even that was flooded this summer in these rains. I counted on the first cutting but the hay was drowned and all we got was half a stack to the hectare. If I touch the grass now it'd be like condemning the cattle to a hungry winter with my own hand. If I could I'd cover that field of timothy with my own blanket at night, anything to make it grow. Well, I rack my brains and get

out of the situation somehow by sending the cows for a week to feed on the stubble. Some of them began giving forty-six litres instead of their usual twenty-six. That's why I stopped the autumn ploughing. I wouldn't even know of this: the herd was out in the fields all the time—they milked them there. But suddenly back the herd comes. 'What's the matter?' I ask. 'They're giving too much milk, Comrade chairman, that's what is the matter. We haven't got enough containers.' What did I ask? Only that they should graze for a fortnight on the stubble. Our land isn't weedy, it won't come to any harm if the stubble's left a bit, we'll plough it later and that's all. Oh no, they must start stubble-ploughing—and we've lost a hundred litres. Good God, a hundred litres! I went off the deep end, I can tell you. All right, call me a lout, if you like. But it seems to me that even if the chairman's a lout his opinion's got to be taken into consideration. I can't throw away a hundred litres of milk. I don't even buy a mug of milk for myself from the kolkhoz. I stint myself so we can deliver more. And now I'm being robbed of milk."

The agronomist, a good-looking young woman with arched brows dressed in a light brown overcoat with a fashionable scarf on her head, waved her hands dramatically.

"Oh, please deduct two hundred rubles off my salary for those hundred litres."

Her face flushed with sudden anger.

Stout, bald-headed Grom stood with his prominent brow lowered and his angry eyes averted. They did not look at each other, these two, only flashed swift, oblique glances at each other.

"I must plough the stubble and I will. I can't break the rules of agrotechnology."

Very quietly Yakushonok said:

"But what will happen if in view of the exceptional

circumstances you don't plough the stubble in some parts this year?"

Grom bounced in his chair. The top of a plastic ink-pot shone in his nervously twiddling fingers.

"That's it, that's it. What's your agrotechnology to me? I need fodder. I need milk."

"There are recommended periods. You are breaking the entire process," the lovely agronomist hissed with hatred. Her usual voice, incidentally, was as cooing as a dove's.

"If we plough the stubble right away we shall lose the milk," shouted Grom.

"But if you delay the ploughing you'll lose still more in your next harvest. You must understand that, you stubborn man," the woman retorted at the top of her voice.

"While we're talking and arguing maybe we can find a way by which the cows can graze and we can manage the autumn ploughing too," said Yakushonok placatingly. His voice was sly, suave, sweet as honey. "Let's agree to this: we won't touch the timothy-grass so we can get a second cutting, and if the soil where the cows are grazing is really free from weed we'll skip ploughing the stubble. But later we'll do the ploughing there in the shortest possible time. Do you agree, Comrade agronomist? We'll choose the lesser of two evils."

The young woman sighed deeply and nodded only half-convinced.

"Well, and how are you thinking of settling with the state, Comrade agronomist?" Yakushonok asked in a different tone.

The woman cupped her chin in her hand, her brows shot up.

"I . . . er . . . I don't know yet."

Yakushonok looked at her in pointed surprise. Grom at once opened his mouth artlessly:

"I told you—"

Yakushonok silenced him with a scarcely noticeable gesture.

"Now, that's strange, Comrade agronomist," he went on. "As soon as you get the plan it is your first duty to sit down and calculate what is in the best interests of the kolkhoz to deliver to the state. Then how it is going to set about doing it. After that you should take your calculations to the chairman."

"I didn't know that was part of my duties. . . . This is my first year here." And now she was looking at Yakushonok with that hostile worried look.

"I see. . . . Well, let's take a pencil and work it out together. Come a little nearer, Danila Semyonovich. So, how much rye have you reaped? How much lupin and buckwheat?"

Later, when both Grom and the woman had grown calmer, he spoke of their relations:

"You squabble between yourselves but it's the collective farmers that get the bruises. That's not fair. Grom says, 'I'm the chairman and that's the end of the matter.' And you say, 'I'm a specialist and understand more than he does.' You can't work that way. One of you goes off somewhere without telling the other about it. You must share the work, decide which of you ought to give orders for buying insect-powder for the cowhouse, and which ought to see that the horses go out to grass."

"He called me a saboteur. He says I hide behind the backs of my relatives in the ministry."

The woman turned sharply, placed her elbow on the table and fiddled with the top of another ink-pot.

"But I'm responsible for the whole farm," said Grom. "I have to answer for it. People say I'm quarrelsome. Well, let them! They get other things from me for their work than words. I wasn't made chairman of this place to look at things through somebody else's eyes, to sub-

ordinate myself to someone else even if I don't agree."

"Listen, comrades, you simply don't know how to organize your work. Danila Semyonovich, you ought to decide things with your specialists without shouting at them, you ought to gather them together and listen to everyone's point of view and then announce your conclusion and ask if they agree with it. After that there can be no question of the agronomist defying your authority. As for you, Comrade agronomist, you mustn't try to order the chairman about. No one has any right to undermine his authority. At present everything here is based on your own hurt feelings: one of you loses his temper. I'm not going to forgive that, he says. And the other does the same. You were right in principle about the timothy but you shouldn't have done it that way. You can't take a combine off work in the fields. Had I been in Grom's shoes, I tell you frankly, I'd have put you in a car and sent you packing. To stop you making a disgrace of him—and of yourself. We value you highly, Comrade agronomist, as a young specialist. You've been trained, you've studied, great hopes have been placed in you. We don't forget that. But Comrade Grom was sent here by the Party and we value him highly too. Now tell me, are you going to start working differently this very minute, working together for the sake of the kolkhoz? Are you going to fulfil the decisions of the Party and Government here in Luchesy?"

"Yes," they both answered, still looking in opposite directions.

As he left Luchesy, Yakushonok took another look at the hospital. The lights were out and in the silvery moonlight the roof looked icy.

"Oh, you make my life very hard, my love," he thought with tender sadness. He had long forgotten Chernenko's

words, tossing them aside like rubbish. Now he even found it hard to imagine how they could have caused him so much torture. He had made no enquiries, asked no questions. He was ashamed of his passing suspicion. But Antonina was obviously avoiding him. From that moment when she had passed him, her head lowered and her eyes averted from him, he might have ceased to exist for her. "All right, so she doesn't love me," he told himself meekly, "but why should she toss me aside like an old rag? Surely I deserve a friendly, frank word!"

"Back to Glubin?" asked the driver.

Yakushonok sighed deeply.

"No, turn round, we'll drop in at Bolshany."

They found Bolshany dark and silent. Snezhko was still in his office, and late as it was, Lyubikov was sitting there too. His saddled horse stamped impatiently near the porch, shifting from leg to leg. The two chairmen were sitting together, their heads resting on their hands. Scraps of paper with figures on them, multiplied in columns in schoolboy fashion, littered the rough felt table-cloth.

"What's keeping you two conspirators here so late?" Yakushonok asked as he entered the room.

Snezhko and Lyubikov were old friends. One evening when they had sat late into the night in a pub, noisily clinking thick glass tankards and reminiscing about the past, they had discovered that they had fought on the same fronts, in the same divisions under the command of the same generals, only at different times.

After that too their lives had run on parallel lines: together they had enjoyed the last days of their bachelorhood in Glubin, married at about the same time and even taken their wives to the maternity hospital within a few days of each other, and now had boys of the same age. True, Snezhko had stayed on working in the district Party committee when Lyubikov was already a kolkhoz

chairman, but now that difference had gone and once more they shared the same cares and troubles.

When Yakushonok came in they were calculating the profit to be obtained on the fields of Bratichi and Bolshany from applying organic-mineral fertilizers in small doses.

"We wanted to run over to Glubin tomorrow to discuss the matter with Fyodor Adrianovich, but Nikolai can't get away from Bolshany just now at the height of the work." Lyubikov spoke with the slow stubborn smile that Yakushonok remembered so well from that first clash in his office at Glubin.

"But you can leave Bratichi?" Yakushonok asked, softening the irony in his question with a jocular tone.

Lyubikov however did not overlook the hidden meaning of Yakushonok's question.

"I can. I need no longer be the shepherd of my kolkhoz. Our folk won't go wandering off in all directions without me."

After this short preliminary sparring the two men looked at each other with friendly eyes as though each were confident of the other's strength.

Yakushonok had been at Bolshany for about an hour when the door opened suddenly. He started.

All the blood drained from his face.

"Ah, Antonina Andreyevna," said Snejhko. "A late visitor. Good-evening, good-evening."

Antonina stood at the door without coming into the room.

"Please arrange for me to be driven to Luchesy, Nikolai Grigoryevich. I was called out late to one of your people and I've been held up."

"Of course we'll have you driven home. Don't worry. Come in and sit down."

He rose to find a driver. But Yakushonok was already on his feet.

"It's not necessary," he said abruptly. "I have my car here. It's only a ten minutes' drive."

Fearing lest she should refuse the offer he went to the door without looking at her.

"Very well," said Antonina after a moment's hesitation.

They left the room together, their shoulders brushing awkwardly against each other. Their expressions were strained. They did not take leave of the others.

Snezhko watched them go out with a look of surprise on his face.

Lyubikov's horse was still stamping the ground impatiently near the porch. They walked past it.

The whole world was cobwebbed with moonbeams. Every little thing around shone as clearly outlined as in daylight—the blades of grass, tiny stones, the fret-work patterning round the window-frames, the hook on the well-sweep. It was still and late.

The driver was sleeping soundly in the car, his head on a cushion.

"There's no need to wake him up," Antonina said suddenly and touched Yakushonok lightly on the arm as if to stop him.

Yakushonok nodded and tiptoed away.

"Then I'll see you home myself," he spoke in a whisper, imploringly.

"It's about three kilometres across the fields."

She walked ahead of him, stepping uncertainly, hardly able to suppress the impulse to turn and take his soft warm hand in her own. How she treasured the memory of their few brief hand-clasps!

The ocean of moonlight stretched smoothly before them over the undulations of the hills. They had reached a point from where Luchesy was visible; the metal roof

of the timbered building of the hospital gleamed as though sprinkled with the first snow of winter.

They did not speak. They walked at ever slower pace, until at last they stopped. Almost deafened by the thumping of his heart, Yakushonok felt all his strength desert him. He stood as if rooted to the ground. He was tortured by the desire to draw her to himself with all the force of his love and passion, to close his eyes, to press his lips to hers, but even without looking into her face he knew how stern and tight-shut was that mouth. He stood, his eyes downcast, patiently digging the toe of one boot into the moist earth.

"Did you arrange matters with your funds?" he said shakily.

"No. How could I? Let them write it off!"

Everything about her expressed a wish to get away from him as soon as possible. Yet she did not move.

"Lyubikov was saying something very interesting just now," Yakushonok said desperately. "About organic-mineral fertilizers."

He stammered pitifully, shamefully, but Antonina suddenly picked up this peculiar subject of conversation.

"It's the first time I've heard of anything like that," she said hurriedly. "Maybe it appeared in the papers but I missed it."

His reawakened heart again beat so wildly that he threw back his head to inhale a little air into his lungs. He saw the stars that usher in the dawn moving to their posts.

They had said good-bye to each other several times, extending their hands only to drop them again without touching each other.

"When are you sending for your family?" Antonina asked in an abrupt strained voice. Against her will a lost and resentful note crept in.

But he was much too absorbed in his own inner struggle to notice her tone.

"They don't want to come," he muttered reluctantly. "Mother has grown used to her own house, and she's working. My sister doesn't want to lose her school-friends—she's in the sixth form now. It's time I had my own family, Antonina Andreyevna."

Perplexed by her silence he turned and looked at her. Her face was pale in the moonlight and at that moment seemed to be so remote that he dropped his hands limply and turned to go.

"Dmitry!" he heard her call to him in a deep drawn-out voice, a voice of one that might have just come out of a dream.

Hardly believing his own ears, he turned to her again.

And in a fraction of time all that had been torturing them both dissolved. Everything seemed to them unimportant, insignificant in the face of the truth that stood before them now. And had a really serious obstacle arisen between them now, they would have overcome it.

Antonina took a step forward, stretched out her hands palms upwards in a gesture that was full of humility and repentance.

Something in that gesture touched him so strongly that a hot wave passed before his eyes. They clung to each other mutely.

Yakushonok's heart was beating so loudly that he wondered if it was the whole world ringing.

He wanted to bend down and place his hand to the ground: surely it must be the earth throbbing like a plucked string?

He felt amazed, dumbfounded with gratitude. Were he fated to be struck by lightning beside some lonely tree within the next twelve hours, it would not matter. Let it happen! He had the beginning of this new day to be grateful for.

"Forgive me," he whispered after a long silence, as he pressed his cheek to her cold one. "Forgive me for ever doubting you. You're not angry, are you?"

"How can I be angry with you?"

"How cold your cheek is! You're like a meadow in May: cold and pure and fresh."

He ran his hand down her arm from shoulder to wrist, thrilled by the feel of the soft cloth.

"You're wearing your green frock," he exclaimed joyfully: everything gave him joy now. He grasped her trembling fingers and looking deep into her eyes said, "It's precisely a month since I saw you on the road. D'you remember? Today's the thirteenth."

"I remember," she replied softly. "Listen! Let's make a promise now that whatever bad things we may be told about each other, whatever happens in life—after all, anything can happen—we'll believe only in each other. All right?"

He kissed her without saying anything.

She stroked his face, drawing him to her, then pulling slightly away from his embrace without taking her hands off his shoulders. She leaned her head on his breast and suddenly heard the strange, deep change in his heart beats. She was there in his arms, for all her life.

The immensely high dome of the sky, grey-blue with a few dim silvery stars, began to turn green and almost transparent near the horizon. The night was melting under their eyes. Strange clouds crept along the rim of the sky: grey and lumpish, as if someone had tossed into the air a handful of soil and it had broken up into pieces. There was not a part of the whole sky that looked the same.

They stood at the cradle of the new-born day.

"Listen, you'll have to double back to Bolshany. What'll they be thinking?"

"Let them think what they like. They won't have much time for thinking. Today I'll come over for you and drive you into Glubin to change your status. Understand what I mean?"

"Yes, I understand, Comrade chairman of the executive committee."

She suddenly grasped her face between her hands and looked at him with eyes full of gay alarm.

"So soon, Dmitry? Couldn't we wait a week . . . a month?"

"Not a single day. I don't want any more of your tricks."

A lonely pine-tree in the middle of a field—the sentry of Luchesy—stood with its dark boughs flat against the sky as if glued to a sheet of paper; behind it everything was fantastically striped with waves of light. From somewhere floated a three-leaved cloud. Its filaments were drawn not along the horizon but upwards towards the zenith and stood upright like the petals of a tulip. And when the first crimson beam of day—like fire forgotten in the stove—shot through a narrow chink between two close-packed clouds in the east, these petals were slowly infused with light as though a lamp were being lit within their cup; and then the whole of this enormous pink lamp glowed gently, its colours changing constantly and elusively from crimson to scarlet. The air too became unusually light and pale; a man could walk far in that air without feeling tired.

"Let me go, please, dear. You leave first," said Antonina.

"We're never going to part again. I'll take you to Glubin."

"To the hotel? No, you'll live with me here in Luchesy. D'you see our window?"

Once more he looked at that window behind the thick green hedge of unfading lilac.

They walked to the fence. Now everything around them was suddenly veiled in a mist that rose from a hollow. But even the mist was threaded through with pink light: the rim of the sun had topped the horizon.

"Listen to me," she said when she was already on the other side of the fence. "Do you know why we're so happy?"

She was overwhelmed by a feeling of intimacy and kinship with him and sought carefully for the words to express it.

"Because of you."

"You're silly. No, really, I'll tell you, if you like. It's because we're together with all the others. Lyubikov is also one of us, and Fyodor Adrianovich, and all Glubin. You love our Glubin, don't you?"

"But I love you most."

"No, no.... Come back as quickly as you can."

She waved her hand, and it was as if she pulled down a screen of mist between them. Yakushonok shut his eyes and when he opened them again she was gone and the whole hospital like a stoutly built frigate floated behind the milky mist, its chimneys shining triumphantly in the beams of the rising sun.

3

At noon Yakushonok flung open the door of Klyucharev's office and strode in. He was consumed with joy and impatience.

"Fyodor Adrianovich," he cried from the threshold. "Let's arrange about holidays. If you've no objections I'd like to leave for mine at the end of this month so that I can spend them with my wife."

"With your wife?" said Klyucharev, getting to his feet.

Yakushonok's face flushed and his eyes turned bright blue.

"Yes. With Antonina Andreyevna. Congratulate me."

When Yakushonok had left, Klyucharev walked aimlessly over to the open window and stood there for a few moments leaning on the window-sill. From there he could see the ochre-painted house next door. Right across the sun-warmed yard, parallel to the washing-line, stretched a long, glistening strand of cobweb. When it crossed shaded stretches it disappeared as though melting in the air but in the sunny parts it shone iridescently like glass. Fading flowers and withering stalks were strongly bound together by silken threads and if you looked around carefully you would find all ways closed to you. So bound and swaddled and patiently laced together is the autumn earth. The very words "woman's summer"** convey that stubborn tenderness when much has been understood in life, many concessions made and when the short summery days will soon inevitably turn to winter....

The sound of the door being opened made Klyucharev look up again.

Pavel Gorban, wearing a thick travelling-coat, strode across the room with his right hand outstretched. He too was in particularly high spirits that morning.

"Fyodor Adrianovich, everybody's in the lorry. If we leave now we'll be able to catch the evening train."

"All twenty going?"

"Twenty-five. We had some more volunteers at the last moment."

A few days before a farewell party had been arranged at Glubin to celebrate the departure of a group of young people from the district to the virgin lands. There was

* Woman's summer (*babye leto*)—the equivalent of Indian summer.—*Tr.*

music, and many fine words were spoken. Even the fact that the young people were leaving a year late and would be in the Altai only for the second year of virgin lands campaign gave them a special feeling of responsibility. They were not going out of romantic fervour; the Glubin folk had pondered hard over their decision, they had trained their replacements at the collective farms: one milkmaid training another, a tractor-driver turning over his tractor to a comrade.

“The conquest of the virgin lands is no short-term campaign,” Klyucharev had said on that evening. “The Party’s call will inspire as many people in a year’s time as it does now.”

“So you’re going,” Klyucharev said to Pavel now, laying his hands on the young man’s shoulders.

Pavel looked at him with moist dark eyes.

“I’m doing the right thing, don’t you think, Fyodor Adrianovich?”

“Yes, my dear fellow, you’re doing the right thing. Who’s carrying on for you here now?”

“Valya is, for the time being. But the regional committee is sending a first secretary.”

“So everything is in order. Well....” He grasped Pavel’s face between his hands, bent down and kissed him on the lips. “Remember now when you’re travelling and when you get there that the young people will think of you as their Komsomol leader. And don’t forget Glubin.”

“I’ll remember, and I’ll never forget you, Fyodor Adrianovich.”

The boys and girls sat in the back of the lorry with their wooden chests, their baskets and bundles. They were all dressed for the winter. The girls were wrapped up in their mothers’ shawls, the boys in army coats and skins. From a distance you might have thought the lorry was carrying a load of poultry, so much noise arose from it.

"Stop!" Klyucharev called, catching sight of a shy-looking girl among the others. "What's Eva Ilchuk doing here? What are you up to, Comrade Gorban? Abducting the best section leader of the district! Come down, Eva."

But the girl merely shook her head and the boys laughed and got in front of her.

"Oh no, we're not giving her up, Fyodor Adrianovich."

Someone struck up a song.

The driver slipped in the clutch and the lorry moved off.

"Be happy, all of you!"

"So long, Glubin!"

Klyucharev saw them turn and shout something to him but he could not catch the words. He stood there in the road with his hand raised.

They were very young, full of unspent emotions and setting out in life with expectant eyes. The Polesians, boys and girls of the farmsteads of remote Dvortsy and Grabun, were going into the big world, into their Soviet land.

The wind stirred the tree over his head, leaves fluttered down like golden fruit glowing and glistening in the sunshine.

4

Evening fell. The pine-trees glowed with sunshine like great candles. Every leaf on the birches and aspens was soaked in light and seemed to be emitting it. Every blade of grass was a needle with the reddish evening light threaded through it.

Life is good in the autumn.

As Lobko walked he waved a twig that he had broken off a tree. The road stretched before him cool and dustless. He felt he could go on walking along it all the

way to Dvortsy. He had arrived an hour before by a "passing plane." (Remote Polesie must be the only part of the country where they had that expression, "passing plane," he reflected. But that's how it was. In these parts an old woman could die without ever having seen a train or a trolleybus but knowing well enough what a plane was.) Lobko had been picked up by a medical plane, a frail contraption like a big green grasshopper.

An hour before it left he had rung up the aerodrome on some business and had been told incidentally that there was only one unscheduled flight that day—a plane for Glubin leaving in forty minutes' time.

Lobko felt his heart beat happily at those words. He made an instant calculation: it would take fifty-five minutes to fly to Glubin, and he could come back in the morning by the mail plane.

He rang up home and got in touch with the college. ("Why, Leonty Ivanovich, you're like the proverbial wolf," they replied jokingly. "Whatever you feed him on he wants to get back to his forest.") Then he dashed to the aerodrome.

It was a still day and the plane seemed to be flying very slowly. But before long, on the right, where the afternoon sun was shining brightly, the town with its gardens and dolls' houses was swallowed up in a dense golden glow, and the earth lay spacious and many-coloured in green and yellow patches. Hempen strands of roads snaked across it in various directions.

"The town I love smiles to a friend," Lobko sang to himself joyfully at the thought that soon he would catch sight of the white stone school at Glubin. But for the slight rise and fall of the plane its green grasshopper wings might have been motionless. The plane hung in the air swaying slightly, like a toy on a Christmas-tree. Even the sound of the engine was no more than the chirring of an insect.

"What district are we flying over, Comrade pilot?" Lobko shouted.

"Ozersk," the pilot called back, turning and looking down under the palm of his hand.

They had left the sun behind them and were flying towards clouds. Sometimes their shadows lay on the wings but not for long: the liquid golden light would sweep them off.

Klyucharev was not in his office.

"He's gone over to see Snezhko. Snezhko's chairman at Bolshany now, you know. Or didn't you, Leonty Ivanovich?"

Lobko shook his head sorrowfully: he didn't know, he was getting behind the times.

He decided not to wait and started walking along the Bolshany road.

"It's all right, I won't get lost," he said in a hurt tone of voice. "It'll do me good to get a bit of exercise after my sedentary life."

He walked on, the familiar places awakening many memories. Part of the way he rode in a lorry from the creamery. He sat in front beside the driver and another passenger. Breaking the regulations, of course, he told himself, but there were no militiamen under those trees to blow their whistles at the lorry.

"Comrade Lobko," the driver said, proud of his old acquaintanceship, "are you working with us here again?"

"No. I'm on a business trip," Lobko lied for some reason and coughed importantly.

"Maybe you're checking the topographical group that is working here?"

The driver unconsciously connected Lobko's well-known scientific bent with the mysterious work of the topographers who were wandering about the district just then.

"No, I've simply come to have a look round. To find out how you're living and what you lack."

"Are you going to drive all the time?"

"No, I'll be doing a bit of walking too. My allowances cover that."

They laughed.

"Well, what d'you think we are short of in the district?" the second passenger, a sun-tanned young man from the creamery, asked challengingly.

Lobko reflected and said seriously:

"Machinery, skilled workers and culture."

"Culture ought to come first," the young man said hotly.

He turned out to have been a member of a dramatic circle which had fizzled out. It was a pity because life was dull. Not a single professional performer had been near the place for three years.

"When will our chiefs get round to dealing with that?" the man asked angrily.

Lobko reflected. "Oh, Fyodor Adrianovich, what an angry, exacting lot you've got growing up in your district."

The car turned off the Bolshany road at Luchesy. Lobko found himself alone again.

After all, he thought, it was useful to walk. Good idea if the regional Party committee sent their staff out on walking trips so that they could look around a bit and then their reports wouldn't be rewrites of the previous year's.

The sun had sunk quite low and the dust underfoot was turning coral-pink. Autumn was creeping in stealthily, taking advantage of that defenceless hour when all the watch-dogs fall silent and neither man nor bird stands on guard over the sleeping earth. Not everywhere had the fields been harvested, the grass still grew recklessly after the last cutting, but now and again the wind

brought from the north a chilly breath of approaching snow.

Klyucharev's car shone from afar like a star of the first magnitude. It cast broad belts of light generously all around, transforming everything by its even blue rays. The evening shades which had been sleeping peacefully on the warm meadows rose and stood in line at the border of the light, defending the darkness....

Lobko screwed up his eyes and smiled. He stood in the middle of the road. Sasha blew his horn, then stopped.

"Leonty Ivanovich?" whispered Klyucharev incredulously.

They hugged each other.

And all at once—as happens sometimes—they did not want to go anywhere or see anyone else. Sasha turned into a cut meadow and stopped beside a high cone-shaped hay-stack. They pulled out a few armfuls of hay ("Never mind, we'll stuff it back afterwards") and lay on the ground enjoying the heady scent of the grass.

Sasha, guessing that he was in for a long stop, went off to gather twigs for a fire.

"I missed this place," said Lobko, looking through his spectacles at the calm sky.

The land was shadowy but the last reflections of evening played in the sky, rolling after each other like waves, reluctant to expire.

"There's the evening star," said Lobko, pointing with a straw towards a delicate feather of a cloud under which the star nestled. "It's silvery. But if you look hard you'll see that stars are all different colours, especially against a dark sky. They change colour like traffic-lights on the road. Maybe we shall soon reach that road, that thoroughfare. What d'you think, Fyodor Adrianovich, shall we live to see that day?"

In the convex lenses of his spectacles two tiny silver

points gleamed, as though those lenses were the round eyes of telescopes trained on the star.

"Actually, the stars are hard-working too, like us," Lobko continued, pushing the hay under his side. "And here's something interesting: some of them have already burned themselves out but we still see them, we shall see them for another three hundred years. The starlight travels through the Universe the way the good reputation of a man follows him on Earth after death. That must be what's known as immortality.... What d'you think?"

Klyucharev did not reply. His heart was too full. How many times had he thought regretfully, "Oh, I wish Lobko was here. I miss my good friend."

Now Lobko was lying beside him, his head resting on his hands.

"You've got thinner, Fyodor Adrianovich," said Lobko. "Have you had a difficult summer? Well, never mind." He looked Klyucharev over encouragingly though with the usual twinkle in his eyes. "The day will come when they'll put up a monument to the unknown secretary of the district Party committee. I'm sure of that."

"I don't want a monument," muttered Klyucharev.

"Why not?"

Lobko looked at him like an elder brother: with exacting affection. He might have been saying, "Well, let's have a look at you, Sonny. Let's see what you've become, and what we can expect of you."

"This is no time for monuments, Leonty Ivanovich. Sometimes I don't know where to turn for shame."

"You ashamed! Of your Glubin? I don't understand. Why, you're way ahead of anywhere else."

"Just that." Klyucharev raised himself on one elbow and threw away a bit of dry grass which he had been crumbling between his fingers. "You talk like Pinchuk. He used to come back from the regional town petted and

praised and he'd be quite surprised that we asked something more of him. After all, when he came here in nineteen forty-five he found the place in ruins and misery—just the remains of what the rule of the *pans* and the occupation had left of Western Byelorussia. So, of course, if Pinchuk looks around now he feels satisfied: we've done everything, we've built a paradise on earth. The regional authorities are satisfied too: Glubin never gives them any headaches, it fulfils its plan punctually. But we often swim round those plans of ours like a lot of loaches. If we fulfil them we shout in terms of per cents, and if we don't fulfil them we find a way out by comparing our results with the last year or the year before last, and say that we've registered a rise on that. We throw dust in our own eyes and even applaud and say, 'Thanks to the care of the Party and Government....' But what are we doing in response to that care? We drag the plan along, day after day, like harness, and rejoice when we're an advanced district. But compared to what are we advanced? Compared to the laggards? Not much honour in that.... All right, we've fulfilled the livestock plan, our cows stand in sheds. But where's the milk and butter, how much do those cows give? How is it that the cow a collective farmer keeps at home gives ten litres of milk a day, three thousand a year? It's the same breed as the cows in the kolkhoz sheds, there's nothing special about it. We're always discovering things that have been discovered by others long ago. Jesus Christ was born in a manger, you know, which means that there were mangers in the cowsheds two thousand years ago. But we here have only just got round to discussing whether they're necessary. And we go on throwing the fodder under the feet of the cattle. 'Fodder, fodder,' we cry, 'silos!' Well, we fulfilled the fodder plan all right. But to tell the truth, if we're really going to improve our cattle-breeding we need to have twice as much land un-

der fodder crops in this district. If we don't do that it means we're not responding at all to the care that's being taken of us."

"You want to do everything at once, at one bound," said Lobko thoughtfully, blowing out a cloud of cigarette smoke.

"No, not all at once. But how long can we go on making allowances for ourselves? Ought we to be glad when we're praised only because others are worse than us? I'm ashamed of praise of that sort. When I hear it I'm afraid to look around. And everybody gets so surprised and asks, 'What does he want? What's he worrying about?' Maybe there are people who think I simply want to push myself forward and to be taken notice of. . . ."

"No, they don't think that," said Lobko.

He rubbed his forehead and cupped it in his palms. Sasha had lit a fire about forty paces away. It had grown quite dark. The smoky fire cast little light but they could see the sparks which the resinous wood threw in all directions. A pot of water hung on a tripod over the fire.

Lobko touched Klyucharev's arm.

"Well, thump the table. Demand what is right."

"I do. But you'll thump your fists sore against those tables before—"

"Whose tables do you mean?"

"Ours," said Klyucharev, cooling down.

The meadow pools gleamed in the light of the brightening stars. Long strands of mist curled along the low ground at the foot of the slopes. Both men mechanically watched their creeping advance.

"In order not to get panicky and depressed," said Lobko, "it's sometimes useful to look at everything we do from a height, from an aeroplane, so to say. You say there are many mistakes and shortcomings. That's true. The easiest way to explain them is to call them growing-pains: father's coat splits at the seams when his son

wears it. But in my view, it's more a question of transition pains. The Revolution provided a medicine for many diseases, but they still hide like dirt under the finger-nails and live on, though in smaller form. For instance, we're no longer threatened by general famines through bad harvests, but we still have bad years, we still get droughts. We haven't the opportunity to grab a million in some Panama gamble and feel we're in clover, but we can still squander state funds, though that's bound to lead us to jail in the end. We can't act like colonizers even in the most remote parts of our country, but we can still act like petty tyrants—as long as we can get away with it without someone thumping the table and sending us packing. Incidentally, Fyodor Adriano-vich, let me tell you an interesting case about table-thumping. It happened during the war. We were in one of the little Baltic towns. We'd fixed up an editorial office in a half-ruined house; the place was still burning all around us, the anti-aircraft guns were barking away, rubble crunched underfoot like egg-shells. A woman came in, ragged and dirty, with children clinging to her skirt—such frightened little puppy-faces they had. She started bawling as soon as she came in. You should have heard her. Shouting at the top of her voice. And she kept trying to thump her fist on the table, right under my nose: she wanted us to give her a room straight away, and clothes and something to eat and drink, and to be evacuated to the rear and to get information about her husband. 'Comrade,' I said, 'that's not our business. We're a newspaper office.' 'I don't care what your business is. You've got to do it.' 'Then the least you can do is to stop shouting,' I exploded. Suddenly she fell quiet, caught her breath and looked at me with such weariness and simplicity in her tearful eyes that we all felt something cold run down our spines. 'For three and a half years I've had to speak in a whisper under the Germans. At

least let me shout now. Surely I've the right to do that?' 'Oh yes, shout, please, dear comrade.' We crowded round her and our editor who, incidentally, was a glum fellow, flung the window open with such force that all the glass that was left in it fell out, and shouted to the editorial office driver in a voice as if he were ordering a field-marshall's coach: 'A car for the wife of a Soviet front-line soldier!' That was because her husband had been at the front since the first days of the war.

"And so I think, Fyodor Adrianovich, that our main strength is always in our own hands. And it is our right to try and make things better. How many so-called people on top have you got in your district? Thirty? Your duty is to train them so that they become magnets that attract all that's better...."

Klyucharev listened intently, nodding his head now and again.

"A man like Chernenko, for instance," he joked, his mind on quite another subject, and went on imitating Chernenko's high nasal voice, "'When I lived in Minsk my life was on a 'high cultural level.'"

Lobko joined in the laughter and parted his hands.

"Chernenko is a man empty inside. Everything in him is too flexible, he assimilates too easily. Everything suits him: it's all the same to him as long as he's not affected. He's worse than an obvious bureaucrat: you won't catch him easily by hand. Incidentally, how's Pinchuk getting along?"

"God knows. Maybe he's changing a bit."

They fell silent.

"I feel more at ease with the collective farmers," said Klyucharev with a sigh, resuming his pet subject. "Dvortsy hadn't begun the autumn sowing last week so I spent two days with the agronomist there, we got the people together, walked round the kolkhoz and discussed things. They finished the sowing today."

"That's right. But it's more difficult in Glubin. People there think they are important enough themselves, they've got used to giving orders. Have you noticed, Fyodor Adrianovich, that as soon as someone gets into a position of authority in Glubin—either on the district Party committee or on the executive committee—the first thing he does is to order the uniform of a leading official: a cloth tunic and riding-breeches with a leather seat as if to say that in future he's going to have to sit a lot at conferences and that he doesn't intend to let a fact like worn-out trousers hinder his work."

Lobko broke into loud laughter as he knitted and unknitted his fingers in a familiar gesture. Klyucharev scratched the back of his neck. He felt a little embarrassed for he too had that "uniform" though without a leather seat to his breeches. Zhenya had told him once that he looked like a fireman in it. "Damn it," he thought, "maybe they took the fashion from me."

"Well, Fyodor Adrianovich, let's see what your mistakes are; evidently you have some, otherwise you wouldn't be so restless. People like you and respect you. They have no doubt about your sincerity. But, all the same, sometimes the bullet misses the mark. When people feel they know a man too well they lose their interest in him, if not their confidence. It becomes too easy to live. When you know how someone is going to react you can anticipate that reaction, in other words, prepare a loophole for yourself. Isn't that so?"

"Yes," drawled Klyucharev, nodding mournfully. He was listening very attentively.

"You are too well known in the district. People have studied your methods of work which, to be quite frank, are not very varied: if something goes wrong, off you go in your car, driving hell for leather. A day or two passes and everything is put in order, everything's explained. You've got a reputation for being able to do that.

And that means people are not very much upset if things go wrong for they feel they can rely on you to put things right at the last moment, to put your shoulder to the wheel. Moreover, this district is an advanced one and a misfire won't be noticed against the general background. As a matter of fact, that's the most fertile soil for cheats and slackers, Comrade Klyucharev."

Lobko struck a match angrily.

Klyucharev's face suddenly creased in his awkward little boy smile.

"So it looks as if I need to be led along by the hand occasionally too? I need to be taught a few simple truths?"

"That's so," Lobko concurred gravely.

Sasha rose to his full height beside the fire and waved to them. They stood up, stretched their legs and walked to the fire. The pot was on the boil. Chunks of peasant-baked bread, with honey spread on them, lay on burdock leaves for plates.

"They gave me this at the farmstead," said Sasha casually.

"Maybe I'd better go and work in another district, Leonty Ivanovich?" Klyucharev said later, a little sadly.

It had suddenly occurred to him that he would have to meet Yakushonok every day and that Yakushonok would be Antonina's husband. The news of their marriage still beat in every cell of his brain as a dull subdued drone.

Maybe the delight that he took in Lobko's presence was due to the fact that he wanted to shed his load of sorrow if not by talking of it to a friend, then by simply having one at his side. And the fussy, ever ironic Lobko possessed to a great degree the rare quality of being able to understand everything and say nothing.

"As for leaving, Fyodor Adrianovich, it's a matter for you to decide. But in my opinion it isn't necessary."

Sasha who could not help but overhear their conversation gave Klyucharev an anxious look. But Klyucharev also felt it would be a pity to leave his Glubin.

"No, I can't leave for the time being. Not yet. Why, our kolkhozes are only just beginning to stand on their own legs. The main thing now is to consolidate our success so that people will get self-confidence. What if I should go away and things get worse under someone else? No, when I turn the district over I want it to be strong," he added candidly.

"What's the time?" Lobko asked suddenly, looking at the sky which now teemed with stars.

Klyucharev peered at his watch.

"Ten past twelve."

Another day had begun.

5

Dusk was falling on Glubin. The streets were carpeted with leaves which gave off a faint, sweetish smell. They no longer rustled underfoot but lay as soft as satin. The puddles shone brightly. Around them the dusk seemed lighter.

Suitcase in hand, Zhenya walked towards the Party committee building: her stay here was over. It was time to return. Klyucharev had been called on business to Minsk and had offered to accompany her. It would take them three hours to get to the station if Sasha stepped on it. The day before he had dropped in to let her know the travel arrangements and they had had a short talk. Sasha had looked a bit worn and weary.

"Just got back from Pyatigostichi and now we're off to Dvortsy. And there's a car waiting outside the Party committee—one of the chiefs has come from the regional town. There's no peace for me nor for Klyucharev. And

I, by the way, have entered my name for evening school. We're all studying now, even Pinchuk."

"Really? What form is he in?"

"The tenth."

They laughed absent-mindedly.

"See that when you drive to Dvortsy he has a good sleep," said Zhenya with the tone of an elder sister.

"Sleep? Not him!" said Sasha angrily.

Zhenya remembered that she had heard the wireless announcer that morning slate the region dispassionately but mercilessly for its autumn sowing. "We haven't finished everywhere in our district either," she had told herself worriedly.

"Listen, Sasha, you must take care of him all the same. He'll fall ill if he goes on dashing about like this. He's not in such good health as it is. And it'll be worse for you too: he'll fall ill and be sent to lighter work, to the Crimea, perhaps. . . ." She broke off, her little joke falling flat.

Sasha suddenly struck his knee savagely with his cap.

"That doesn't scare me. I've no kids to hold me here. If he leaves, so will I. I'll follow him."

"All right. You'll go with him but what about the rest, the whole district?"

"They could do the same," he said, cooling down.

They both laughed at the thought of the whole of the Glubin District turning nomad and setting out over the bumpy roads through Ozersk and impenetrable Fedory.

"Where are you off to, Glubin folk?" Kurilo would ask them.

"We're following our secretary, Comrade Kurilo."

And once again Zhenya thought how well Klyucharev suited his job, how much people needed him.

Zhenya certainly did not consider Klyucharev perfection itself. He was on the simple side in his tastes and manners. He probably did not know many things--he'd

never had time to learn. The world of music, poetry and the theatre was far from him (would he ever find the time to acquaint himself with it?). But he was a complex and highly talented man. Sometimes it seemed to Zhenya that he ought to be examined in turn through a microscope and a telescope.

The street lamps went on. Zhenya thought they looked like the first stars of night, clear and twinkling. She could hear loud strains of music coming from the main street: on the next day there was to be a song festival. Lorries full of girls in multicoloured costumes drove briskly into Glubin. The song festival! Glubin itself suddenly seemed to her to be a song, Glubin with all its good and its bad people.

And she felt as sad and sorry to leave it as if it were her own birthplace.

"Come on, Zhenya, dance," Fyodor Adrianovich said to her when she went into his office for the last time. And once again, as he had done two months before, he waved a blue envelope over her head.

She did not smile as she held out her hand for it. No, she was not very eager to get those letters. Boris would be writing again to tell her how happily his life was shaping: he had finished his post-graduate course and was staying on in Moscow. For a time, of course, they would not be too well off as to living space ("We'll live like students, Zhenya dear. You're not afraid of difficulties, I'm sure").

Zhenya found it hard to sort out her feelings, but as she watched all these different people in Glubin she could not help thinking more and more, "Why isn't Boris like them? Oh, if he only were!" She most readily imagined him in Kostya Sosnin's place or Kostya in his. The two characters became confused in her imagination. She would have liked very much to bring Boris to Glubin so that he could see it all with his own eyes. And

then they would have taken each other's hands firmly, oh, so firmly. Perhaps for all their lives....

She parted from Klyucharev the next morning on the broad square in Minsk. The yellowing trees in the public gardens were shedding their leaves. And though the first snows were still far off there was a sharp nip in the air.

"Well, the summer's over," said Klyucharev in a way that told her that he was thinking that now all was over.

They walked slowly towards the square. It was still early but the day was drawing in; people walked about talking loudly; their tyres hissing, trolleybuses whizzed past. Watching the way the vehicles skimmed over the mirror-smooth asphalt, Zhenya suddenly remembered the pot-holed roads of Glubin, the sandy tracks of Ozersk and the sickening, tortured engine-whirr of lorries trying to lurch forward out of the sandy holes. Yes, Glubin was a long way off now.

Klyucharev helped her across the street, not taking her arm, in the usual way, but grasping her by the hand as if she were a child. He let go a moment later but she treasured the memory of that friendly contact with a sense of gratitude.

"It's going to be quite difficult for me now," he said abruptly. "There are so many new problems to be tackled. And we're late with the autumn sowing. Of course, we shall do it, it's only a matter of days, but it's difficult all the same."

They stopped in the garden.

"Difficult," echoed Zhenya.

"I can't even come to see you off," Klyucharev said guiltily. He glanced at his watch. "In an hour, no, in forty minutes, the secretary of the regional Party committee is sending his car to the hotel for me."

“That’s all right, I’ll manage,” she answered lightly and even tossed her head to show that it really was not important—just another train, just another journey. “My suitcase is not at all heavy.”

“So you have to leave too,” he said reflectively. “You really have to?” he went on. It was half a question, half a statement of fact. He waited for her answer.

In the darkness overhead a plane passed silently—a calmly moving green light. “What if I should go back?” Zhenya thought suddenly and her heart beat fast and happily as before a desperate decision. “Tomorrow at seven there’s a plane going back. Why shouldn’t I take it? I’ve enough on me for the ticket.”

“You could have stayed on in our district or gone to one of the neighbouring ones,” said Klyucharev at that moment with a discreet cough. “You’d have looked around a bit, worked.... There’s a lot to interest you in our district.”

The green light of the plane was still visible in the sky. Zhenya followed it with her eyes.

Something very big and important was born within her at that moment. It was as though she had stepped across the threshold of her youth and entered another, more mature period in her life. But as yet she could not express that in words. She simply felt her heart grow lighter and happier, yes, happier, for surely happiness is the knowledge that you are sure to find, that you have already found, your real place in life.

“Do you remember?” she said hurriedly, laying a hand on Klyucharev’s sleeve. “Do you remember that time we drove to Bratichi and stopped on the road? Sasha brought the car up suddenly: there were birds flying low across the road. The first birds, like the first swallows.”

“They were swallows, as a matter of fact.”

“Really?”

“They’re the first to fly away.”

"Well, good-bye," she said. She was the first to put out her hand.

It occurred to her that on such occasions it was customary to say "*proshchai*"* but that word seemed strange and theatrical to her now. Whom had she to forgive and for what?

Surely there was no need to forgive people for coming into one's life, like a ship entering a river, cutting its waters and making its sleeping banks resound to its signals? The people pass, leaving a little of their warmth, and you too give them a little of your heart and afterwards you think of them constantly with admiration, with pride. How could it be otherwise?

For is not our life made beautiful by the great fraternity of friendships and loves?

* From Russian *proshchat*—to forgive.—*Tr.*